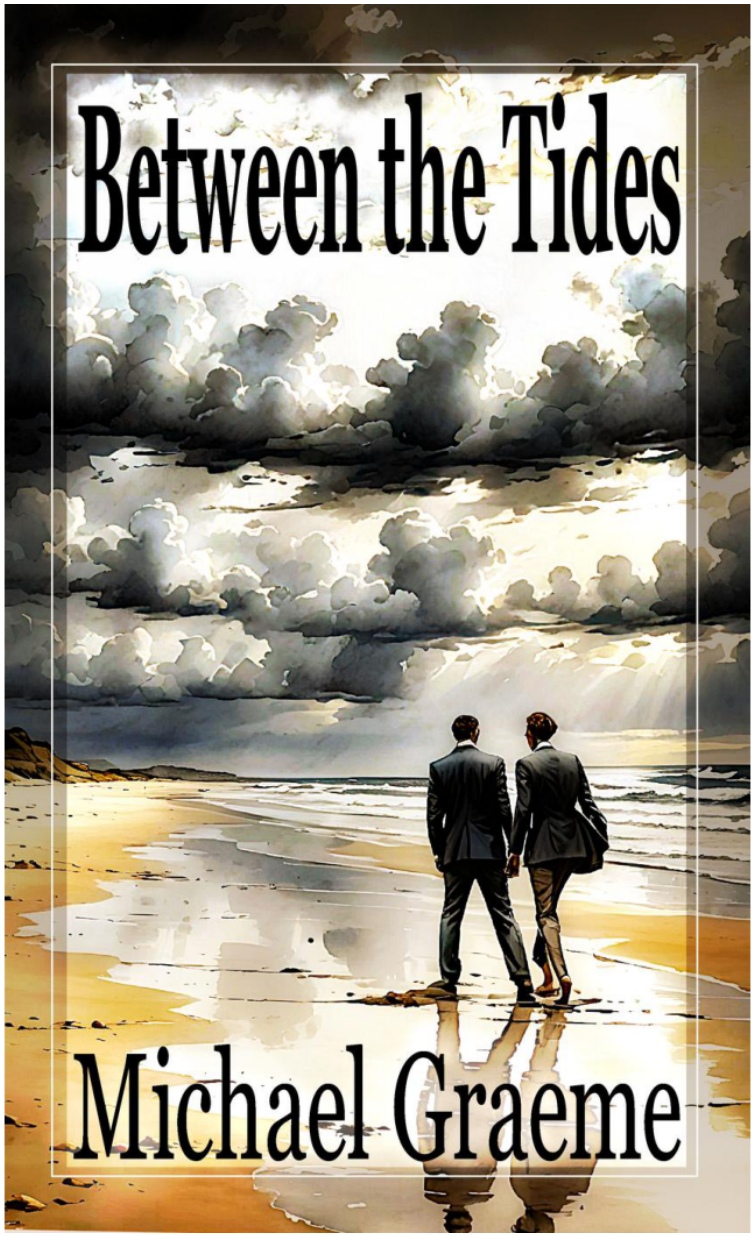
Between the Tides
Michael Graeme

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by

Michael Graeme

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Chapter 1

Adrienne

Imagine a woman, mid-thirties, slim, with long reddish-brown hair. She's wearing a smart navy blue suit, white cotton blouse and a scarf that shimmers in shades of grey and silver. She holds herself well, like a fashion model, or an actress. Good looking? I think so, but how about this: you've seen this woman before. She was in the post office queue this morning, or you caught a glimpse of her across a crowded coffee shop somewhere months ago.

You don't remember? Of course you don't, but never mind, it's not your fault; for all of those good looks, hers is just one small life, and seemingly of little account in the great scheme of things. Sure, it's a pity even beautiful women can sometimes pass us by unnoticed. But what it also means is this: unless I can convince you she has something you need, you're not going to be thinking about her for long this time, are you? Your eyes will drift away, other thoughts will enter your head, and she'll be lost to you. And that would be a pity, because I want you to know her. Indeed, I want to know her myself.

Shall we see how we get on?

Her name is Adrienne by the way, Adrienne Divine, and she's an estate agent – at least according to her business card. But I'm thinking she has to be more than that. More than something ordinary. Or there's no story here, and there's definitely a story if only I can get at it for you. So why not tag along and let me try to convince you there's no such a thing as a small life, yours, hers, or anyone else's – no such thing as "ordinary", and that the next time you see this woman, really *see* her, you'll remember her for the rest of your life.

Now, let's talk about you.

Who are you?

Maybe you're the guy in the car waiting beside hers at the traffic lights right now – radio cranked up so loud we can feel it, the dull vibrations invading our bones. You turn lazily, and you see her. What might she have, do you think, that's worth holding your gaze a moment longer?

Does it just come down to sex for you? Are you wondering how easy she is? Are you wondering – forgive me – what she looks like

under her clothes? Or maybe you're a sentimental kind of guy, in which case I might be able to tempt you with the promise of a little romance first. But would that really be anything other than a hundred thousand words of foreplay, and equally pointless if at the end of it, all you wanted was to make love to her like the other fellah? No, you have to *want* more, *see* more in her than that, or she'll never fulfil the aching need in you for longer than five minutes, and you might as well turn away now.

Or maybe you're not a guy at all. Maybe you're the woman on the other side who's just pulled up in your little roadster, top-down, blipping your throttle impatiently at the lights. What do you see when you look at Adrienne – this elegant, long haired woman, sitting with such poise behind the wheel of her pale pearlescent-grey Ford? Is it a reflection of something you recognise in yourself? Does this intrigue you? Or do you dismiss it? Do you think her too prim and self-possessed for her own good? Would you rather I told you something dark about her? A scandal perhaps that will wipe the smugness from her face, and lead her swiftly to ruin?

Well, shame on you.

I'm the guy riding beside her by the way – plain grey suit, white shirt, tie at half-mast. You've seen me a thousand times as well, in all the same places, and I'm just as instantly forgettable. My only significant attribute this afternoon is an air of embarrassed unease.

What do *I* see in her? Well, look a little closer and maybe you'll see it too. Do you see the paleness of her cheeks? It's almost luminous, like white porcelain. It lends a dramatic emphasis to her eyes, which are green and cool, and a little remote. And there's something eerie about all of that, something unsettling in those eyes. It may be that she's sick – I don't know – but what I *do* know is there's something about this woman that's worth more than an idle glance. There's an edge to her, like the serrations of a key. I've felt it scraping over my soul and settling into place just right, unlocking a story that's simply aching to be told.

As for what I want right now, it's nothing more complicated than to lay my head against the soft cushion of her breast, and go to sleep. Well, it’s either that or see those emerald eyes light up in fond recognition. I should add neither of these things is remotely likely since we only met half an hour ago, and our conversation thus far has been rather stilted. But that's better than trying to convince you I'm already in love with her.

The lights change. She slips the clutch, snicks the car into bottom gear and we cruise away – nothing hurried. All is smooth and sedate. I feel safe with her, as if wrapped in that silk scarf, feel myself bound tight like a babe to her breast. No, it's not a sickness I sense in her at all. There's a remoteness for sure, and that's intimidating, but there's also a gentleness and a stillness, and I fancy she might possess a touch like feathers upon one's skin.

I take a breath, and venture: "Is it far?"

"Not far now, Mr. Simpson."

Her voice has a softness to it. It carries well though, has an air of concentration, of seriousness, of calm. Yes, she's a quietly confident woman.

"The name's Sampson, by the way."

"Ah. Sorry. Mr. *Sampson*."

But there's no hint of any real apology there, at not remembering my name, no shy self-deprecating smile at her forgetfulness. She merely marks the error and it stings because I'm in love with her, and want her to at least remember my name.

"Have you had a busy day?"

"So far, yes."

Her voice has a flatness to it, now. I imagine it's telling me to mind my own business. I'm over-sensitive, I know. My imagination can be my best friend, but when I'm falling in love like this it's more often my worst enemy, unicorns out of clod-hopping horses.

"You must enjoy your work?"

"It's all right."

"Gets you out of the office a lot?"

Already, I'm feeling like the spurned lover, the man who can't take no for an answer. I'm also losing heart and on the verge of surrendering to this uncomfortable silence. But that would be to make the afternoon memorable for all the wrong reasons.

She manages a tight little smile by way of response, and I should be encouraged by that, but instead I read it as indifference. Like with the softness in her voice, all I feel is detachment. There's a message here: I take one look at her and fall in love. She takes one look at me and thinks... nothing.

Chapter 2

The Divine in Ms Divine

So, we've been on the road for half an hour, me anxious I can find no spark to lighten the atmosphere, and all the while feeling this insane urge to talk, to fill the air with noise, anything to disguise what I imagine is my very obvious arousal.

Did I say arousal?

Sorry.

It's not like you're thinking – more in my chest, and my heart. It's a first love sort of thing – pre-pubescent and sweet. It's not that I'd ever do anything about it either, because she's wearing a wedding ring, so I shouldn't be thinking of her in any way whatsoever, beyond the business in hand. But it's hard to change the habits of a lifetime and, since the outcome is likely to be the same unrequited pining it always is, I see no harm in running with it. I'll be with her for a few hours, then we'll go our separate ways and I'll be carrying the bitter-sweet essence of her around for weeks, until another useless and equally inappropriate infatuation takes her place.

Sure, where's the harm in that? I mean apart from the fact I should have grown out of this kind of thing long before now, because I'm not exactly a teenager am I? It's just that I've never been confident around women, and beautiful women in particular have always been a torture for me, tying up what little eloquence I possess into a stupefied silence. I suppose it's that I can't help projecting all my romantic desires upon them – Romantic, that is, with a capital R. But I'm also a realist and perfectly aware by now women are probably, all of them, simply human beings – not that this stops me from holding on to the vain hope one of them might yet prove their divinity and save me.

Is it any wonder I'm still single?

"Nice car, by the way. Is it a one point six?"

She nods.

Oh shut up Phil!

You're wondering where we're going? Sorry, I should have mentioned that sooner. She's driving me to view a house. What makes things worse is I'm not really serious about the house any more – not even serious about moving to this part of the world. I'm

wasting her time then, and I'm feeling guilty about that. I'm also wondering if she's sensed it, and if that's why she seems so distant.

I'd been serious at first, when I'd made that impulsive appointment with her office. The house had seemed too good to be true – a detached cottage, remote, rural location, a bit of land, and above all cheap – ridiculously cheap. But then I'd slept on it and as is the way with all of yesterday's impulses, I lost my nerve.

This bit of Lancashire is as rural and remote as England gets. We're ten miles from a town of any description, and the villages hereabouts are tiny – just little clusters of houses. Maybe the living would be cheap but, looking at it now, pretty as it all is, I'm wondering if there are certain kinds of living no better than a waking death – places so tucked away no one even knows you're alive.

But then does that really matter? What can be more obscure than a life lived alone in a city? And isn't our obscurity the single most infuriating mystery of human existence anyway? I mean, given the fact of our overwhelming importance to ourselves.

But anyway, I'm wondering if it's usual, an estate agent driving a client out to a property so far away like this. I thought you simply met them outside the address, and they brought the key to let you in. But the address was not forthcoming and I'm suspicious about that. Indeed, I'm growing more unsettled by the whole business.

When I called at the office, it was to be greeted by rather a stone faced receptionist looking at me as if I'd made a mistake. Even though my name was in the appointment book, it seemed no longer convenient to be dealing with me. She'd buzzed through to the back room for a Miss Carstairs, but Miss Carstairs was not there. It was only after an awkward few minutes, the frosty and divinely elegant Ms Divine emerged from the back office. She was smoothing down her skirt as if to draw emphasis to the gravity of things, and the likely severity of my punishment for ruining her day.

What was it about that moment?

The receptionist disappeared, though for all I know she remained present throughout. All I saw was Adrienne, though I remember how I'd immediately averted my eyes, blushing like a teenager. And why? I was trying to deny myself the sheer *pleasure* of her. I was trying also to ignore the awful lurch in my gut that signifies the start, all over again, of another useless infatuation.

Perhaps it was her paleness, but there'd seemed something

other-worldly about her. Was she possessed of a divine quality, like we imagine of priests? I know all of this sounds ridiculously intense, but it's how I connect with women. It's also the reason it always goes wrong, the same reason it will probably go wrong again, should I ever get past the brutal full-stop of that wedding ring. I mean, why would any woman want to live up to those expectations? Why should she?

So, then we were outside and I was gesturing to my car, and she, shielding her eyes from the sun, looked weary, like she already knew I was wasting her time. She must have seen hundreds of clients already this week, and she'd know from a distance who was serious and who was not.

"Can't I just follow you?" I'd asked.

No, she doesn't want to be here, I'd thought. The woman I was supposed to be meeting, Miss Carstairs, had forgotten me, gone off somewhere else, or she was late back from lunch with a more promising client, and Adrienne was filling in at the last minute with a thousand other things on her mind. Sure, my presence was more trouble than she wanted on a Friday afternoon.

"It saves us losing one another along the way, Mr Simpson."

"The name's Sampson, actually... Philip Sampson."

"Of course. Mr. *Sampson.*"

Yes, there was something eerie about her, something in her gaze that told me when she looked at people she saw right through them, and there'd better be something of substance in you, or you'd be as good as invisible to her. But it was not the penetration of her gaze so much, because there was always something a little unfocussed about it. It was more the sense that she envisioned the world differently, saw shadows in it where others did not, felt currents in the flux of space and time, and it was by this sixth sense she saw the ghosts, and the shallow men, and the thieves, and all the bare faced liars.

So, she turned away, clicked the button on her key and a grey Ford Focus bleeped to life. As she turned, her hair spun out, brushing my shoulder. I caught the scent of it – something sweet and fresh, like honey, or a meadow after rain.

And I fell in love.

Chapter 3

Down to the sea

So, here I am. Here *we* are, driving out to view a house I no longer want to see. I'm going along with it out of politeness, while banking on there being something wrong with it, something I can reasonably object to and decline to make an offer. And, all right, I'm here because Adrienne fascinates me, and I've convinced myself I'm in love with her. But I'm also puzzled by the house, and I admit to a certain curiosity about it. There has to be something wrong with it. If it's not falling down then there has to be a wind-turbine next to it, or a sewage works, or a maggot factory.

Her car smells good, a mixture of lavender and musk – though I'm probably imagining the musk, and in truth I've no idea what musk smells like, only what I think it should smell like which is something warm and velvety and seductive – like honey perhaps. It's a newish model, smart and business-like and spotless. It's not really a girlie sort of car – no cute adornments, no fluffy toys, no glittery danglers hanging from the mirror. Indeed there's nothing at all to give me any clues to her personality beyond the prim and proper estate agent. It's like she picked the car up from the hire agency that morning, all freshly sanitised. She's a cool one all right, this *Ms* Adrienne Divine – smart, professional, dignified, and very, very private.

"They say it'll be nice this weekend."

"They do?"

Give it up, Phil!

The roads in that little corner of Lancashire are quiet and narrow. They curl tightly around low limestone hills and slip unseen between tall drystone walls that enclose summertime meadows rich in soft, sweet grass and buttercups. And the further west you go, the views begin to open out, revealing unexpected glimpses of a glittering sea.

I'm surprised when we come down to the sea. We steer around a densely wooded headland, thick with shadow and mystery, dropping steeply as we go. And suddenly there it is, the sky peeling open, softly lit with a hazy sun. The tide is out, revealing an unsettling plane of puddled, glutinous mud. Coming from the claustrophobic forested shade and the deep cut roads, to be faced at

once with this infinity is disorientating, and I feel myself go a little dizzy.

I squeeze my eyes shut, reopen them, focus.

I don't know why I'm surprised she's brought me to the sea, because with a name like Beach Cottage, and boasting sea views, it has to be somewhere near the sea, doesn't it? I'd just thought it was going to be like all those "sea view" hotels tucked away at the back of a grubby town where you can see a tiny bit of sea, but only if you lie on top of the wardrobe and crane your neck.

Too cynical?

It's an inevitable consequence of middle age, I'm afraid, when you realise your world is predicated on ideas you no longer recognise as true, or worse, as delusions that have held you in thrall the whole of your adult life. So you do irrational things like fantasising about leaving it all behind – your daily commute, and your job with its email inbox of easily deletable nonsense. You decide to sell up, to downsize, to downshift, to leave behind the world of glassy-eyed beer swilling men, who are my occasional companions. But most of all, my useless infatuations with impossibly remote women like this one.

So, you ring up on a whim to enquire about the impossibly cheap house, because you've done the sums and worked out you can live off the sale of your own place until the pension kicks in. But at what price to the quality of your life? Is it not better to pay lip service to the world of delusion, if only because it's better to be deluded in your purpose and distract yourself with fripperies, than to contemplate the awful truth – that you might have no purpose at all?

Anyway, it's a pretty little village, a dozen houses or so, stretched in a line opposite a short length of promenade, facing the sea. There's a pub and a tea shop, and a church on the hill. It's all very green and fresh and wholesome. Very English. Maybe I'll be all right here after all. Maybe the air will do me more good than years of meditation and self analysis ever did. But just as I'm wondering which sea-front house it is, we turn off the promenade, down a little slip-way towards the beach.

Have we gone wrong? Surely she's made a mistake because now we're rumbling along a pitted concrete causeway towards the sea, and by the way I'm suddenly gripping my seat, you might be forgiven for thinking there's something about the sea I don't like.

And you'd be right.

"Em, where are we going, exactly?"

"Didn't they tell you at the office? The house is out on Leven Island."

"Leven what? No, they didn't tell me anything."

There are a few tidal islands dotted around this bit of coast. Leven Isle is one of them, by far the largest and the only inhabited one. You can drive out to these places but they're inaccessible at periods of high water. Is that why the house is so cheap then? I mean who can live out here and hope to commute? No wonder they didn't say anything at the office. No wonder she insisted on driving me. Had I come in my own car, I would have turned around at this point, because right now the idea of living out on a tidal island seems perfectly ridiculous.

Still, I'm thinking at least I have a reasonable get-out now. The last thing I want is to be living in a place I can't escape from whenever I need to. It means I can hum and haw and then decline to make an offer on perfectly reasonable grounds.

Too remote, Ms Divine.

"It does have electricity? And running water?"

I notice a flicker of her brows and fancy she's struggling to suppress a smirk at such an apparently stupid question.

"Yes, all mod cons."

"What about a telephone?"

"Well... of course."

The causeway crosses a broad plane of muddy sand. The concrete slabs from which it's constructed are all buckled and potholed, their edges crumbling, encrusted with weed and limpets, and in places you can barely distinguish the causeway from the mud-flats, where the sections have begun to sink alarmingly.

Eventually we come up to a craggy promontory – a jutting outcrop of limestone, shining white in the sun like a shark's tooth. At first I'm thinking we've arrived, that the journey was, after all, such a short one it's not worth grumbling about, but there's not even room to park a car here. It's just a tiny outcrop, room only for a small building, a shelter made of dressed stone with a shingle roof and a crude plank door.

"Refuge Crag," she explains. "The tide comes in very fast here. If your car breaks down or gets stuck in the sand, you're supposed to make for this place."

I'm getting really nervous now, conscious of my palms becoming moist, leaving marks upon the faux leather, where I'm still gripping my seat.

"Does that happen a lot? People getting caught out by the tide?"

"There's always a risk where the sea's concerned," she says.

I feel a tightening in my chest – the last thing I need is a lecture on the hazards of the sea! And I notice she hasn't answered my question. Is that because she's teasing me, or she doesn't want to frighten me?

"What time does the tide come in today?"

Is that a trace of a smile? Is she enjoying my discomfort now?

"Don't worry Mr. Simpson. We've plenty of time. So long as we're off by four we'll be all right."

I peel my hands away from the seat long enough to snatch a look at my watch. We have two hours.

"Sampson," I correct her. "Philip Sampson."

"Of course. Mr *Sampson*."

Dropping down from the refuge, the causeway continues its journey out across the waste of muddy sand. It curves a little to the right, the run of it again not always clear, as if the concrete is sinking. The tidal currents are piling the sand over it in places, meaning you have to squint ahead to be sure of your way. Surely they ought to fix this, or someone could go badly astray.

All around, there are great puddles reflecting a pale blue sky, and further out I can see the line of the sea, glittering like a twisted ribbon of silver. It looks beautiful, but it feels desperately wrong for us to be so far out in a car. My instincts are to be threatened by it, by the thought the tide may already have turned and be making its way back in, rushing, roaring, racing with the speed of a galloping horse. No, the sea and I are not the best of friends, and if Adrienne only knew that, she'd put her foot down a little and humour me.

A small island is the last place I should be thinking of living and have the sea remind me every day of things I'd sooner be forgetting – things like drowning, of being overwhelmed by the enormity of the ocean, one speck of fragile life in the midst of its vastness. The sea closes over you – just one more drowned sailor, one more pointless life blinked out before anyone's even noticed you're alive!

You're born, you die. And nobody cares.

Come on, Adrienne, floor it!

But even at a sedate pace, the crossing only takes a couple of

minutes.

Leven Isle rises from the mud through a dramatic ripple of heat quake – reminiscent of Cornwall's Saint Michael's Mount, a shapely green stump – a mixture of limestone crags and attractive grasslands, dotted with the crouching forms of wind-bent hawthorns and Rowan trees. There's sea-pink around the shore, and further inland I see dandelions punctuating the green.

It's not what I'm expecting at all.

It's... beautiful.

It's also impressively isolated, impressively lonely. I can't swap a daily commute and the city life for this, can I?

Of course you can, Phil.

Be free. Retire while you're still relatively young. Are such places as this not made for those with solitary natures anyway?

And for the solitary to live as I do now, hiding in the thick of life, in the city, is it not more of a running away from myself? All my life I've craved absolute solitude, but feared it in equal measure. The solitude of this place is as absolute as you can imagine. But it's one thing to shackle myself to a delusion – quite another to cast myself away in a place like this.

Chapter 4

Leven Isle

We come up from the lumpy causeway to land safe on a gravel road, then drive past old boats at the wayside, upturned and rotting. There are weeds and low scrubby bushes sprouting through dried up, wormy timbers. There's a pair of cabins, salt bleached, in need of paint, leaning into each other as if for mutual support. There are lobster pots, bits of rope and buoys strewn about, their once garish oranges and yellows faded back to an inoffensive blandness.

It all carries an air of something worn, beaten down by the endless cycle of the seasons and the sea. But the beauty I glimpsed from further out is gone now. It's appalling; a horrific loneliness, pointing a finger at the pointlessness of endurance. Better to die young and beautiful, it's saying, than old and worn out and ugly, like this.

But these are things I've carried with me: questions, fears, intimations of death, now washed up like flotsam on the shore of this weird place, and it's reminding me there is no escape from what I'm feeling. Worse, it's telling me that to journey into the centre of my own loneliness, without the distraction of the thick of life and all its fripperies, is also to risk madness.

It's not a big island, only about a half mile in any direction – sand dunes, low grassy hills to the south, on which there sits a ruined Peele Tower, and somewhere up ahead, along the lane, is the isolated Beach Cottage.

"No other houses at all?"

"Not any more."

There'd been something once though. We're driving past it now, a short run of low, cottages tumbled down – just windowless, roofless shells, overrun with nettles and thistles and sea-pink. In a different light there might have been something romantic about this, but just now the light's flat and grey, rendering our approach a forlorn prelude, a ruin of broken dreams; all of it weary, and to my mind not a little dangerous.

"Gun emplacement," she says, following my gaze. "World War Two."

"Really?"

"Just the foundations now. It was the army who built the causeway, in 1939, to service the gun, and bring ammunition across. Those buildings used to be fishermen's cottages, but they were converted into a magazine."

"Pity the army couldn't see their way to coming back and resurfacing that causeway."

"Yes, bit of a mess isn't it. It's the council's responsibility now of course, but I don't suppose there's the money any more."

Plus, I'm thinking, it hardly seems worth it for just the one dwelling. Much easier to declare the island uninhabited, and leave it to the birds. If I bought the place, Leven Isle would apparently then have a population of one.

By now, I'm not expecting much of the house. But that's it with Leven Isle- just when you think you can't take the bleakness of it any more, it turns around and smiles at you. I'm expecting a gaunt, scowling monstrosity – Victorian, wind-blasted, with peeling paint, cracked render, and all of it barely fit for human habitation. But when we pull up on the gravel driveway, I'm amazed.

It *is* Victorian, or maybe late Georgian, but it has a sunny look about it, even a friendly look, and a warm heart like a picture-post-card Lakeland cottage. It has two storeys, the upper floor being of quaintly gabled attic rooms. The whole is rendered and white-washed, and I can see a modern a timber conservatory to the south. It looks neat and clean and cared for, a proud sort of place, a homely sort of place. It's almost,...

Charming!

"So... Mr. Simpson. What do you think?"

"Em... the name's Sampson. Why are they selling?"

"The lady who lived here... Mrs. Fox,... she passed away over the winter. It's to be sold as part of her estate."

At first this sounds plausible, but on reflection I realise it's an evasion. "I see. But still..."

"First impressions?"

"To be honest, it looks like the perfect holiday let."

"My thoughts exactly. It's a good market at the moment. There's a shortage of houses like this just now. An idyllic holiday retreat."

"Then why so cheap?"

"The family are after a quick sale. The man my colleague brought out this morning seemed very taken with it. A property developer. We're thinking he'll make an offer before the day's

through, so you'll need to be decisive if you're interested."

Ah... here we go – her sales-patter kicking in at last, as if she's suddenly woken up to the fact she's supposed to be selling this place to me. The family are after a quick sale? Fair enough, but the offer price is still tantamount to giving it away. No, it's that causeway, and the fast tides. Someone's going to have to spend a fortune fixing it, making it safe. Unless you know the area this place could be a death-trap, and it's not just my fear of the sea talking now. If the house was on the mainland, they'd be asking double the price and people would be falling over themselves to view it. There is no property developer. No sale imminent. No one in their right mind would want to live out here!

As I'm thinking all of this, she's reading me.

"Not what you were expecting, then? Would you like to view inside, or shall I just drive you back to the office?"

It's partly spite, I think, that makes me say I'll look inside – irritation at that pointed look that seems to say she knows my mind, when she can't even remember my name. But I'm also curious about the house. I want to see if the interior lives up to the promise of the exterior. It's like a piece of a dream, an oasis set down in a nightmare of loneliness and the house steadies me in it. It restores a sense of beauty to its surroundings – they balance each other. Without the house, the island would be bleak and ugly, and without the island's bleakness, the house would surely seem more ordinary.

As we walk up to the door, I wonder if she's still reading me, and if she is, what might she learn by it? She'll see me looking at her out of the corner of my eye. And yes – forgive me – I'm wondering if I see a lover in Adrienne Divine. We're talking pure fantasy here, of course, and forgetting her wedding ring for a moment, plus various personal, physical shortcomings of my own which I'll get to eventually. But no, I think we've already established she's not real to me, at least not in *that* sense. She's just *too* beautiful, *too* poised, *too* elegant, and eerie.

But I do wonder, briefly, as we stand by that grand oak door, and she puts the key in the lock and pushes it open. I wonder what we might look like in the third person. Might we be mistaken for a man and a woman coming home and pushing open the door on their intimate life together? Or is it obvious we've nothing in common?

"Oh yes," says that third person, "he's just a potential buyer and she's

the agent come to show him round."

Yet entering the house, I feel a mysterious stirring. She sees me looking, and though I avert my eyes in embarrassment, I swear I see a flicker of enquiry in hers, and a slight colouring of her cheeks in response. And seeing that, I too feel a quiver.

What the hell was that?

Chapter 5

Beach Cottage

The first thing that hits you about a strange house is the smell of it. They're all different, all of them imbued with a sense of the lives they've led, and the people they've been home to. Some are repulsive, smelling like a wet dog, or like they've got mushrooms growing somewhere, or a pan of perpetually boiling cabbage, while others are all homely coffee and fresh-baked biscuits.

Mrs Fox? Probably an old lady living alone, and gone slightly potty on account of it. Family moved on. Husband passed away. They're bound to let it go, let themselves go too... and the house has been empty for a long time.

Yes, there's a smell. Adrienne's noticed it too and she's intrigued, her nose twitching speculatively. It's nothing bad – quite the opposite: apples, and cinnamon I think, and a hint of ginger. The sun's been in and out all day, and just now it's come round and is warming the kitchen through the window, releasing the scent of baking days long ago. It lends the house a still lived in air. I feel a comfortable dryness, and more: there are the ghostly echoes of laughter, and cups of tea, and cake, and fireside chats.

Then it strikes me: "It's still furnished?"

But it's not just chairs and tables. There are books and knick-knacks and pictures, even bits of reminder-notes and shopping lists lying on shelves. It's as if Mrs Fox has just stepped outside for a moment. All of this makes me feel awkward, like I've no business being there among these private things, among the pristine ruins of this person's life, especially if I've no interest in buying the house.

"The family said they'd collect the ornaments," Adrienne explains. "But the furnishings are part of the sale."

"Oh?"

She shrugs as if to say it's no big deal. "I have a list somewhere, but much of it looks quite old to me. The best piece is that kitchen dresser, but they're a bit dated now, don't you think?"

I'm flattered she thinks I might have an opinion on the subject. But then such is love. "They just want shut of the whole thing?"

"Easier that way, I mean for probate. I presume they're trying to tidy up the estate without it dragging on too long. You know how it is when solicitors are involved? You'd probably want to start again.

My notes tell me the washing machine's leaky, and the sofa's threadbare." She looks around and wrinkles her nose in disapproval. "You're also looking at completely redecorating. It's very... how shall I put it? Very eighties, isn't it? I think your first job would be to order a skip or two and clear the lot of it. At least that's what I believe the property developer said this morning, and I agree with him."

She gives me a smile now, almost mischievous, and I suddenly find myself defending the place against the rapacious intentions of this possibly imaginary property developer.

"I'll be alone here," I tell her. "And, so long as things work, I'll be happy to make do." What am I saying? Do I see myself living here, now? Why the sudden switch? "And that sofa looks very comfortable, actually."

I do! I've had a glimpse of a possible future here, and it doesn't seem that bad.

But are you ready for the kind of unflinching solitude this place has to offer, Phil? Are you ready to be on such intimate terms with your self, and with the sea? Are you ready to play cat and mouse with it, every time you cross that decrepit, vintage causeway to go to the shops?

I've moved through to the lounge now. The walls in here are wood-panelled and dark, the sofa and chairs generously proportioned and easy-looking in a rich burgundy cloth. It's all a little old and threadbare, like she said, but it seems only the more comfortable to me for that. It's a cosy space, intimate, it speaks of recline, of ease, of shoes kicked off, and feet comfortably up. I picture fireside reads late into the night while the coals crackle in the grate. I hear the ticking of a clock marking out the long slow hours, hours of ease into which I can finally decompress.

It puts me in mind of my grandmother's house, my mother's, and my aunt Flo's, all rolled into one – echoes from a lost world, from a time that was the last time I felt secure among the women in my life. And all of them are gone now. Perhaps that's why I'm floundering? No feminine anchor in an overbearingly masculine world?

I don't really want to escape the world, I tell myself, I just need to find myself a woman. But the time to find a woman was in your twenties, Phil, not now you're in the sunset of your forties. People your age don't mate by choice, but in desperation, and fear of

loneliness in one's old age.

But wait... what's that? I catch the scent of something else... pipe-tobacco? It's like my grandfather used to smoke – Condor Long Cut. I haven't smelled that in decades! It triggers a memory of him up to his waist in a trout stream, the line forming a silvery "S" behind him as he casts. He has a look of absolute concentration, then sees me watching from the bank, and smiles – his face creasing into a look of kindly wisdom. Even now it melts my heart; why are there no sweet men like that any more?

Then I'm thinking of his grandfather, a man I never knew yet feel around me with such a real presence it's to him I habitually ascribe the scent of my grandfather's pipe – thus rolling up my ancestors into one blurred but kindly image of age-old paternal sagacity. I'm wearing his ring, gifted to me by my mother - a wedding band, 18 carat gold, hallmarked Birmingham 1881. He's as far as I can trace back in my paternal ancestry, that old Sampson, or Gramps, as I call him. His image comes to me from a sepia photograph on the desk in my grandfather's study - a working man in his Sunday best, hair slicked down and a kiss curl on his forehead – unsmiling for the camera, as was the way in the long ago. I turn the ring on my finger, surprised by this sudden swelling of nostalgia.

Gramps? What are you doing here?

I always fancy he's telling me something when I sense him around like this. Indeed I fancy my first thoughts after thinking of my great, great grandfather are always significant. And he's telling me I'm wrong, that when a man seeks a woman in his twenties he's obeying the call of nature in hunting out a mate. He has no choice in it. A man still looking in his forties is after something else altogether, something that cannot be embodied by a younger woman – they’re too child-like and fragile a vessel for his needs. What he's seeking is the Goddess within himself.

Well thanks Gramps, but I already knew that. Interesting though, he should be reminding me of this.

There are photographs here, a collection of them on a side table, by an incongruous high-backed chair. They're lined up in a carefully arranged arc, for ease of reminiscing – the gilt of the frames worn at the sides where they've been handled. There are sons, daughters, nephews, nieces, gap toothed grandchildren, and a husband, possibly, weather beaten and fierce-looking, smart in a naval

uniform. I find myself wondering if he was lost at sea.

There's a knurled walking stick leaning in the corner, within easy reach of the chair and, in imagination at least, I see her sitting there – Mrs Fox. She's eighty five, maybe ninety, white haired, smiling, a little deaf and always telling you the same cheerful tale as if you'd never heard it before. Or is that my mother? Or my grandma, or my aunt Flo?

There's a ball of wool and a knitting pattern on the chair-arm, a pair of needles and an inch of something intricately worked beginning to take shape. I'm feeling more like a visitor now, as if I've come to call on her. I feel a twist of guilt, but not at my presence now... more the lack of it all those years – my increasingly infrequent visits as the job took me further away and kept me away for longer, and longer, from hearth and home, while the women in my life passed on, one after the other.

Strange I should be feeling this now.

I should be looking at the size of the rooms, at the view, at the potential for transformation, but instead I'm caught up in the myriad snares of the details – the Leprechaun knick-knacks on the hearth, the ivory handled magnifier, the envelope addressed to a Mrs Amelia Fox, slit neatly with a silver opener.

Mrs Amelia Fox.

The name sends a shiver. Surely I have known this woman, just as I have always been coming here, to this house. Or is it that I've lived here before? All of this is magical thinking of course, and you must forgive me – it does not mean I accept these things as true. It's more an imaginative possibility, a statistically feasible version of a reality parallel to my own.

"Is the rest of the place like this?" I ask. "I mean... like it's still lived in?"

Adrienne nods. She looks as uncomfortable as me, gathering the folds of her scarf to her throat, as if to ward off a chill. Has she not been out here before? Has she not realised the way things are? "They *will* clear it..." she says.

"It's just that I feel a bit awkward – like I'm trespassing."

"I'm really sorry Mr Simpson. My colleague, Angela – Miss Carstairs – usually deals with the house. I'd heard it was furnished, but this is rather more than I was expecting." She sighs, looks about helplessly. What more can she say?

"Would you like see upstairs?"

"Not if Mrs Fox's nightie's still laid out on the bed."

She responds with a thin smile, but not without a trace of dry humour. Is she warming to me at last?

"I'll go and check first, shall I?"

"Please."

When she's gone, I take a deliberate breath, trying to ease the tightness in my chest. It's as if I've been afraid of breathing the air in case it does something to me, infects me with something. But what? What am I afraid of here? I sit down on the sofa, feel myself easing back into it. And as I sit there, I think about my journey, and I wonder how it can be that I've fetched up in such a strange place, and so suddenly, so unexpectedly, when I'd thought my life was set in such a deep-cut groove any deviation from it was impossible.

My ambivalence about the house must be driving you mad, and I apologise for that. One minute I'm thinking it might be just the sort of place I need, and the next I'm shuddering at the thought of spending even another five minutes here. I'm also wondering about the previous occupant, Amelia Fox, and how it is we've come to be introduced so soon, for names are introductions, and I feel her growing on me now, the shape, the character, the sound of her voice in my head.

"It's such a pretty house," she's saying. "And being a solitary kind of man, being among people isn't the "cure" your extroverted friends and pseudo-psychologists say it is. Quite the reverse. Far from being a cure, reluctantly seeking life's crowds can only make you feel like more of an outsider. You should embrace your solitude, honour it, and see where it leads."

Sure, thanks, Amelia. I've wondered about that too.

"And another thing," she says: she'd rather I bought the house and made a home of it, than have some grubby property developer rip the heart from it and sell it on for an obscene profit.

And all of that sounds very nice, Amelia, but you'll need to pick a hardier pilgrim than me. And anyway there is no property developer. The house won't be redeveloped because no one in their right mind would want to live out here, and God knows how you held on for so long. Most likely its fate is to stand empty until the weather gets in, and then it will crumble to a worthless ruin.

A shaft of sunlight brightens the view from the window, rendering the grey sea momentarily blue and sparkling, with white tops. The shaggy grass of the lawn, which had seemed grey a

moment ago, now glows a fertile green. And in my mind's eye I see it stripy-summer-mown, and smelling of clippings, a neat table out in the middle of it, a pot of tea – white china – and on hot Sunday afternoons, a cool Chardonnay, and a pair of wine-glasses.

Sure, it would be a shame... a shame for it to fall into ruin.

And is the causeway really so bad as that? I could just get myself a 4 wheel drive or something, and a pair of green Wellingtons, and a tweed jacket. And a pair of dogs. I've always wanted dogs!

Wait! back up a little, Phil. Did you just say a *pair* of glasses? But for whom is the other glass? What woman in her right mind would follow you out here? You can't even keep one in the comfort of your luxurious Cheshire villa for more than five minutes; what chance do you think you'd stand out here?

Then, as if in reply I feel a woman against me, hair tousled, the teasing smoothness of her under-things against my legs, and there's laughter. I feel my head against her bosom, catch the scent of her skin, of her blouse...

I take a breath. For a moment it's so real...

"Settling in then?"

Adrienne's beside me, watching while I gaze, oblivious, transfixed by the unexpectedly prurient turn of my daydream. Then I'm snatched back to reality, looking up at her, blushing.

"Sorry,... I was miles away."

She blushes too, puzzled by what she reads in me. I like the way she blushes. She's so pale it's hard to miss even the slightest flush of blood to her cheeks. I wonder if she knows she's doing it?

"It's okay, if you want to go up, now."

Upstairs the furniture is old – dark wood again, a stout double bed and wardrobes, most likely bought as a set and which had served Mrs Fox and her husband throughout their married lives of what? Fifty or sixty years? And it still doesn't look too bad. It's polished, gleaming darkly. Why is it everything we make these days looks so old and worn out in no time?

The covering on the bed is modern - and the drapes, too, seem contemporary. There are more photographs and mementos scattered around – a tiger striped conch shell, souvenir of a beach holiday, presumably in warmer climes than this, also a cheap tin clock from Holland, with windmills and daffodils painted on the face. I don't know what I'm expecting but this is no old lady's chamber; it's a woman's bedroom – there's perfume, Chanel... a hint

of powder, a hint of secrets, and Amelia Fox is young again, a doyenne of the war years – nipped jacket, pencil skirt and seamed stockings...

I can't stay here for long. The atmosphere is overpowering – it sets my pulse racing, sets me on edge. And it's not the thought of death – she did not die here, Mrs Fox. It's... God help me... it's sexual,... a raw eroticism I'd not known I was still capable of feeling! Meanwhile, Adrienne remains out on the landing, holding herself, knees together, tense, one arm by her side, the other across her stomach as she massages her elbow. There's a haunted look in her eyes, as if she too can sense the atmosphere of the room. Is she all right? What is that? Is she trembling? No... shivering. She's cold – the house is cold.

I've seen enough. The place is filling me with something else now... not dread... it's more a sense of longing, but for what I do not know: a million different things, and all of them lost to me now; there's love, warmth, and that imaginary hearth again. I feel my heart ready to break, and I'm struck by the revelation that no matter where I've lived these decades past, it has never been a home, not like this place has been a home to generations.

Why is this coming out of me now? Think Phil. Pull yourself together! But I can't help it; it's dribbling through the cracks in me like melt-water, and I can't staunch the flow.

"Perhaps I should just take a look at the garden?"

It's a ruse to get us out of the place. From there we can get back in the car and drive away, drive back to things as they were before, all sealed up and safe. But Adrienne doesn't move, her eyes are fixed on nothing in particular, her gaze turned inwards, and she's fingering something at her bosom, under the lapels of her jacket. I catch a glimpse of silver, but whatever it is, she pushes it back safe inside.

"Ms. Divine?"

She gives a start. "Yes?... Sorry, Mr Simpson. The garden, you said?"

"Em... it's Sampson... but, never mind."

She's not listening. She's turned on her heels, descended the stairs a little too quickly, and is teetering on the bottom step like she's about to fall. I rush to steady her, but then I watch my hand as it freezes in mid-air, unable to touch her. What? Am I to let her tumble, lose her dignity in an untidy heap of bared leg and stiletto

heels?

It's all right; she catches herself, then makes straight for the door, throwing it open like someone gasping for air. But for a moment there, I had a premonition of something.

Chapter 6

The Tide

I feign an interest in looking around the garden so as not to make it obvious all I want to do is leave. At the same time, I'm conscious of Adrienne hovering in the background, still unsettled by something, holding herself now like a broken thing, and I want to ask if she's all right, but she's not the sort of woman who invites intimacy, so I keep my distance.

I discover the house comes with five acres, not two, like the brochure says, though most of it is uncultivated. I can see it's been a smallholding, otherwise why would anyone live all the way out here? But that was a long time ago, and about the only other use for the island was as a strategic gun emplacement, seventy years ago.

I'd say there was room for development here, but the island is no doubt protected against such apostasy, the land therefore useless for anything but grazing and planting. And who would want to start up subsistence farming again in this day and age, and in so bleak a spot?

The garden consists of a slightly more manicured area, demarcated by stout bushes and stands of pines, planted, I'm guessing, as windbreaks, perhaps as long as a hundred years ago, their tips swaying now in a stiffening wind. The house sits snugly in a corner of the five acres, and the land runs on, part way down to the sea, through grass covered dunes. In the other direction it goes up the side of the hill, atop which sits the Peele Tower, like the ruins of a fairy tale fortress.

The holding is enclosed by drystone walls, mostly tumbled now. I have a vision of myself taking a pleasurable age in repairing them, stone on stone, a kind of weather beaten meditation. There's room for a stable, and pasture for a dozen ponies. I'm not a horseman, but I've read somewhere there are a lot of ponies that need rescuing from cruelty, and surely this place would suit them? Or is that donkeys? I try to imagine it. Me and a bunch of shaggy donkeys, all of us beaten up and rag eared – the perfect company for one another.

There's a gate in the wall that lets on to a path that runs between grass covered dunes, then down to the beach. Here, just inside the gate, there's a dolmen half buried in the wall - intricately

patterned with weather-worn whorls and spirals. Adrienne places her hand upon it, something tender in her manner, something reverential.

"That's amazing. Is it real?" I ask.

"Yes. There are a few on the island. This is the best one though. Its rare to find marked stones like this in the open in England so well preserved. Most were broken up in early Christian times, or sanitised with Christian symbols. Or they're fake - relics of the Celtic renaissance in Victorian times, or more recently Neopagan vandalism." I see her long fingers brushing the indentations. It's as if she's reading them. "You're not superstitious are you?" she asks.

"I can be. Why? Are they supposed to be unlucky?"

"Depends how conservatively religious you are." She smiles, as if at the memory of something. "I'd forgotten – there's evidence of a long occupation here." She nods for emphasis, then warms to her subject: "There's a sacred well too, probably dating to Celtic times, though I've never found it. It must be very overgrown. And up by the castle, can you see? Those outer fortifications, they date to the Iron Age. The Peele tower is much later of course, though there's some speculation its foundations are Roman." She points her nose at me again, this time as a sort of challenge. "Would you like to see the beach, Mr Simpson?"

Something's changed in her. Have you noticed? It's an act perhaps, a mask she's put on to hide her discomfort, but she seems impish, as if in touching the stone, the stone has animated her with a different kind of energy, something more her own perhaps. Either way this is no longer an estate agent, a pounds, shillings and pence business woman, talking to me. She sounds almost... intellectual.

"The name's Sampson. Is it far?"

"Just through the dunes. Since it's mentioned in the brochure, it would be a shame not to see it. And who knows? It may be the one thing that clinches it for you."

"Then lead on."

We've walked a short length of sandy pathway now, between the dunes, and come down to an attractive bay. I'm expecting to see a crescent of uninviting mud, which would be typical of the coast in those parts, but the sand here has dried golden and is studded with the washed up remains of razor-clams that twinkle in the sun.

She looks out of place here in her suit, and with her clip-board against her bosom, though she's swapped her heels for a pair of flats

and makes her way with rather more of a sturdy step than her stick thin looks would suggest. I'm wondering if she likes ponies.

The beach is backed by a tangle of grass topped, shaggy dunes. It's a cosy afternoon sun-trap, and the sea washes against it with a steady rhythm. Bees buzz contentedly in the wayside weeds. The scene puts me in mind of seaside holidays, of buckets and spades and deckchairs and windbreaks. I test the sand, running it between my fingers. It's delightfully clean and soft. It's not exactly idyllic in the tropical sense, but it does have something.

"If this doesn't sell it to you, nothing will," she tells me. "Your own private beach."

"Really?"

"Well, not *really*, it's outside the boundary of the property, if that's what you mean, but when the tide's in I suppose everything you see is your own private domain – if only because there's no one around to tell you it's not."

There's something of the philosopher about her now. She's relaxing, becoming unbuttoned. She seems almost... I don't know,... charming. I sense a keen intelligence, even a sense of humour in there somewhere, and wonder exactly what it is this woman's in hiding from.

"Will you get campers out here, do you think?"

"Not many – mostly day-trippers in the summer months. Very few casual visitors ever stay over the tide. There's not much here for them you see? No pubs, no tea shops. You'd be pretty much alone here most of the time, I think, at least when the tide's in."

"You speak like you know the island, yet you say you've not been to the house before?"

"I grew up around here, Mr. Simpson. Tide permitting, my parents would drive us over on Sunday afternoons, my sister and I. We'd go up to the castle. There's a lovely view from up there. We'd play tennis on the grass, fly kites, explore the ruins." She hugs herself and sighs. I sense happy memories.

Bits of her are definitely opening up. There's still an aloofness, but I see it more clearly now as a kind of armour from behind which the occasional glimpse of something more sincere escapes. I see her as a little girl in a diaphanous summer frock, tanned feet strapped up in sandals as she skips among the tumbled stones of the castle, or tugging at the line of a dancing kite. And then she's a teenager, swift limbed, willowy, exploring the long grass, looking

for her sacred well. And her sister, what would she be like? Are they still as close as when they were children?

Leven Isle basks in full sun now, though the breeze is stiffening and the western horizon darkens as if to hint at a coming storm. The contrast of it is at the same time attractively striking, yet also vaguely unsettling. I have the feeling of being out on a limb here, that for every blessing Leven Isle bestows, there will always be a price to pay.

Meanwhile the air is briny and invigorating. In my mind's eye I see a blanket on the sand, a straw hat and a pair of flip-flops. The sea has a friendly blueness to it, a golden ripple in the troughs and a clean white foam as the waves spill. It's very beautiful, but then I realise I'm not imagining the nearness of the sea, that the tide appears to be coming in.

"What time do you make it, Ms Divine?"

"Three."

"But the sea looks so close, don't you think? I thought we had another hour."

"Are you worried about the crossing, Mr. Simpson?"

"Sampson." *Dammit.* "I,... don't know, but I'd like to go back now. To the mainland, to the office, if you don't mind. I need to think about it."

It's true then. I'm wasting my time, and hers. My cowardice is sneering at me, a familiar gargoyle of depression sitting, like always, on my shoulder, draining my energy, telling me what I'm incapable of doing and frightening off every grain of confidence I possess. Sure, I might have made something of the place, but for now the vision of it scares me. I want to retreat, I want to contemplate it from a safer distance. I want to give it time, and trust the imaginary property developer is more zealous than I, that he will win it from me and save me the difficulty of having to deal with it any further.

Adrienne smiles, a genuine smile, I think, and for the first time. I know because it warms me, and there passes between us a secret understanding. It's nothing I can define in words; it's more an emotional concession, a lowering of defences. We walk together along the path, in silence now, something shy about us for a time. But then I think she realises for sure I've no intentions of buying the damned place, that I'll never come back, that she'll never see me again so, perversely, she opens up completely.

"It gives you the creeps doesn't it?"

"The house? No... not the creeps. The house is lovely. But there's something, an atmosphere. It made me feel... odd. It was just that it still looked lived in. It's hard to imagine putting your own stamp on it when you see a place like that, still so full of another person's life. You're better with a blank canvas – even a slightly jaded one – then it's easier to imagine yourself there."

"I know what you mean. I'll mention it at the office, see if we can't get the family to sort something out, but they live so far away, it's proving difficult." She gives a shudder. "Between me and you, Mr. Simpson, I don't think they've a hope of ever selling it in the current climate."

"Not even to your mysterious property developer?"

She gives me that thin smile again. "I'm sure he'll put an offer in. But you know what they're like. It'll be an insultingly low offer. The family want a quick sale, but I trust they're not fools either. Better to sit tight for a while, until the market picks up."

"It'll suit a particular kind of clientèle, I suppose."

"And are you that kind, Mr Simpson?"

"Sampson. I don't know. I just need a bit of time to think about it."

"It's all right. Really. I understand."

"I don't know if I could live so far out, if I could stand the isolation, I mean. It's what I thought I wanted... to get away from it all. But this... this would be like casting myself adrift. It would be like living on a desert island and I don't know if that appeals to me. Also, to be honest that causeway frightens me to death."

"I agree, it's not very convenient for commuting – having to work around the tides like this. We should have been more honest about that in our brochure. But if you can live with it, Leven Isle's not so isolated as it looks. The nearest supermarket's only quarter of an hour away. The railway station too. And I bet that crossing doesn't take more than a couple of minutes. Shall we time it on the way back?"

How remarkable, this sudden melting! We seem almost like friends now. It's ironic, or simply human nature to be most friendly with people you think you're in comfortable sight of never seeing again. We're back at the car now, and she's looking at me from across the roof while she sorts out her keys. Is that it then? Are we done? A short drive back to Carnforth and a return to mutual

obscurity? Can the day really have been so pointless as that?

No, there's more here. There has to be. What am I missing?

Sinking inside the car, I catch the scent of her and breathe it in. So often my infatuations are bestowed upon women who are unworthy, possessed of the usual vices of stupidity, vanity and spitefulness, vices that reveal themselves only too quickly once the veneer of etiquette is worn away, the gloss dissolving to a disappointing emptiness. But with Adrienne the gloss is the infuriating part, hiding an essence I'm convinced is vanishingly rare, and reassuringly substantial.

We've been driving only for a moment, and I'm checking my watch – preparing to time the crossing – when the car judders to a shocking, grinding, ABS assisted halt. Then I'm looking up in surprise, looking at her while she stares out, unbelieving. I follow her gaze, the pair of us bearing stunned witness as the causeway is consumed by a tidal bore six feet high and atop it a long line of white horses, splashing, galloping by, trailing behind them a silty wash of sea.

The tide is in.

We're trapped.

Chapter 7

Castaways

Adrienne is even paler now, her hands trembling - I notice she grips the wheel more tightly in order to steady them. "I don't understand! We had plenty of time!"

"It could be the weather. Sometimes a storm at sea can interfere with the tides, holding them back or pushing them in ahead of time. I've spent a while on boats and rigs. Tides aren't always the predictable things they're supposed to be."

She's not impressed by this scientific explanation, but can't think what else might be the cause, other than supernatural, and I'm sure Adrienne and I do not warrant that kind of intervention.

"Most likely I just made a mistake," she says. "The moon's coming up to full just now – higher tides, and a bit more vigour to them."

Against her paleness, her lipstick seems a more vivid shade of red, a red gash that speaks of wounds, or sex. I also note her knuckles, white, as she grips the wheel, something angry in them, something spirited that would wrestle with this conundrum if she could. But for now, her words trail off and for a long time she just gazes out. I'm puzzled too by references to the moon – it's true of course, what she says, about the tides and the full moon, but for a moment there it sounded like we were summoning up references to the gods of old.

"We'll just have to wait," I tell her, still wondering at her familiarity with the phases of the moon - it's not an awareness people casually carry around with them any more is it? Our fresh-packed, neon-lit world simply has no need of it.

"But it'll be hours and hours! I'm so sorry, Mr. Simpson."

"It's no problem. The name's *Sampson*, by the way."

The soft contours of her face have hardened giving her a much more angular look, the lines on her brow deepening, ageing her. She might be forty now, or sixty. I see a weariness and a pain there, as if with the coming in of the tide, her own inner tide has ebbed to reveal rocks and wrecks, and rusted anchors with busted chains. I relish it. I don't want to glide about on the surface of her like this for much longer, or things will become unbearable. It's what lies beneath that fascinates.

I try a reassuring smile. "We'll be fine."

"You don't understand. By the time its clear to cross again, it'll be dark."

"Is that a problem?"

"You saw the causeway. The sands come up in places and sweep over it. It's not always easy to tell what's causeway and what's not – especially in the dark. And I'm not confident I can drive over... at night. One false move and we could end up in quicksand."

There's something contrived and over-careful in the way she explains this, and I know she's not telling the whole truth. "I'm sure we'll manage, if we take our time."

"All right, I'm sorry. I need to be honest with you; I can't see to drive very well after dark. Not without my contacts. I'd rather not risk it."

"Ah... and your contacts are?"

"In my bathroom cabinet." She misinterprets the look on my face as alarm, and rushes to reassure me. "I can see to drive well enough in daylight,... but at night, without them..."

This smacks of vanity, which I had not thought to find in her, but decide I shall forgive it if she can avoid revealing to me the vices of stupidity and spitefulness. No... I decide a certain personal vanity in a woman is endearing, and only rarely infuriating.

Anyway, all of this is unfortunate, but it's still not a problem. If the worst comes to the worst, I can offer to drive us back when the tide goes out, drive her home, if need be. I'm insured to drive anyone's car, albeit, on a third party ticket – which is a risk of course – but the alternative is... well... spending the night on the island.

"Perhaps you should ring the office," I tell her. "Let them know what's happened, so they don't worry. They might even send someone over for us this evening?"

"But they'll think I'm an idiot."

"It wasn't your fault."

"It's kind of you to take it so well, Mr Simpson. But Angela... Miss Carstairs... we've not exactly been getting on, and I may be imagining it, but lately I've been thinking she's looking for the slightest excuse to sack me. Stranding a client might be just the thing that would do it."

The insights quicken!

"But the alternative is spending the night here."

"I'm perfectly aware of that."

"Well... I've nowhere else I need to be, and in case you're worried about it, I won't be complaining to Miss Carstairs, either. It's really not your fault."

"All right. Thank you. That's... very decent of you."

But it's really only dawning on me now, that I might actually be here for the night, with Adrienne. The practicalities of such a thing, like food and shelter don't even enter my head, and for now all I can think of is not wasting a single moment of this extra time we've been miraculously granted. But she's married Phil, remember? She has a house and a home away from here - a husband, and maybe children too? You are not just looking at a woman here. You are looking at a family.

She's toying with her 'phone as if she's thinking about making the call anyway, as if the thought of staying the night is more than she can bear, but then she's shaking her head. "I'd forgotten, there's no service out here. I can't call anyone anyway. What about yours?"

Mine too is showing the zero bars of a rare dead-zone. "You said there was a 'phone at the house?"

"Disconnected. It might be okay for emergencies – but... is this an emergency? I mean a 999 kind of emergency?"

"I admit it seems a little trivial, calling out the air-sea rescue. I'm sure we'll manage." Then I take a breath and chance a more personal question: "Will there be anyone at home worrying about you?"

She thinks on this a while, going to great lengths to avoid my gaze. It's obviously not that she can't remember if there's anyone at home for her, more a question of whether she trusts me enough with that information.

"No," she says. "You?"

"No."

She allows me a wry smile, then surprises me by saying: "That sounds a bit sad, doesn't it? The pair of us stranded out here and no one to 'phone home to, even if we could."

"Ha... yes. We must both have gone wrong somewhere."

My heart is skipping now. A pair of loners together, then? But what's with the ring? If she's divorced, why keep it? Might she be available after all? Have we done it? Have we got past the awkward fact of her wedding ring?

"So," I say, forcing a brightness. "Back to the house?"

"The house?"

"We can't sit here all night."

"I suppose not."

She gives a nod. Then, grim faced, she reverses the car up the ramp, three points it neatly, and we drive the short distance back to Beach Cottage.

Chapter 8

Coffee, black, no sugar

There's double the embarrassment this time as we let ourselves in. I'm waiting for her to say something to lighten the mood, but she's sunk back into that defensively chilly place, and she's not for coming out. This seems a little perverse to me because I no longer consider us strangers. She obviously does not feel the same, but surely what's been said already in that brief unguarded exchange, before the tide cut us off, cannot be unsaid.

Bridges have been built towards a kind of friendly intimacy. All right, she constructed her side of things when she thought she'd be rid of me, when she thought she'd never have to cross over that bridge again, but here we are, already half way to knowing one another and the night ahead of us. She can't suddenly become frosty again.

Can she?

Once inside, once the door has thudded home and the silence and the scents of the house have enfolded us, she excuses herself with a murmur and a lowering of her lids. Then she trots upstairs to use the bathroom.

It may be my imagination, but the house feels even colder now. There's a fire laid in the grate, and some matches on the mantelpiece, so I close my eyes and try to visualise Amelia Fox. The image that forms is entirely my own of course, but nevertheless I seek permission from this avatar for me to make so bold as to light the fire in her parlour. I have little patience for that literal form of professional spiritualism we see pedlled on our TV screens, but I think an innate spiritual sense resides in all of us – call it spiritual etiquette, if you will. Call it imagination too, if you prefer, but Amelia twinkles her assent, so I bend to light the fire, then settle back upon the sofa to watch as the flames curl around the logs. The logs, sluggish at first, begin to glow, then spit and crackle, reminding me of childhood evenings spent in dreamy reverie, watching the coals burn.

The image of Amelia lingers, and I find I'm not troubled by it.

Indeed, she's reminding me now how it was that simple things used to mean so much – like the atmosphere of an evening at my mother's house when, these days, things so subtle as an

"atmosphere" are vanishingly hard to discern. I remember the way the sun picked out the colours of the furnishings at different times of year. I remember the sometimes sulphurous scent of the coals as little jets of primordial gas leaked with a fierce hissing sound from the grate. I remember the texture of the fireside rug as I dug my fingers into it, and the purring of a contented cat.

Magical things, says Amelia, things we grow out of noticing, or else we become blind to them as they're submerged from view beneath the ever present weight of our email inbox. If we're lucky we wake up and realise, without magic, nothing in the grown-up world holds any kind of allure. If we're unlucky, we shrug off our childhood and pass the rest of our lives in ignorance that things can ever be any better.

"For how can one live without magic?" she asks. "Without it, Philip, there's no point to *anything*."

But some of us wake up and begin to crave it anew. We begin to invent it back into our lives. We look for symbols, for signs of a reality beyond the everyday. And we invent ghosts to talk to, ghosts to guide our intuitions, like I'm doing now. And we care nothing for the danger they might be leading us astray – because, hey, things can't be any worse than they already are.

When Adrienne comes back downstairs, her collar is undone and there's a redness around her eyes, as if she's been crying. I'm upset by this and I want to reassure her, but instead I succumb to embarrassment, pretend to ignore it and sit there eyes averted.

"I lit a fire," I tell her, stating the obvious. "We need to keep warm. I'll tidy it all up in the morning."

She stands a while, not speaking, as if gathering courage for something, and then she says: "Mr. Simpson. We don't really know each other. You seem very nice and everything, and I don't mean to be rude, and I *am* sorry for causing you all of this trouble – *really I am* – but just now I need a little space, okay?"

It's as if she's slapped me. I feel the sting, but try not to show it. Of course. What am I thinking? It's not as if we're friends and we're clearly neither of us the type who makes them easily. But Amelia's still with me, watching me, watching for my reaction, and she's not smiling. What is it Amelia? Don't misjudge her – she has every right to be this way. She's my goddess and can say and do as she pleases, including stabbing me in the neck with her Stiletto heel. Or is it that you think me so ungentlemanly I would retaliate at such a

pointed rebuff?

The lady has asked for space! Space she shall have.

I get to my feet, surrendering the sofa. "Why don't you curl up here. It'll be warm enough soon. I need to use the bathroom, anyway. There's a comfy looking couch in the conservatory. I'll settle down in there. Let me know if I can do anything for you, or get you anything."

Both Adrienne and Amelia are intrigued by this – perhaps wondering what I mean. Need anything? *What are you saying? You're the client. What are you doing, assuming responsibility? But this is no longer business, Adrienne. This is personal.*

Adrienne nods, manages a bit of a smile – but there's not a lot of light in it, just enough to let me know she does not dislike me. But neither does she like me enough to want to spend the night feeling her way through a tiresome morass of stilted conversation. And who can blame her? I chide myself for that momentary twinge of petulance, tell myself it's not for me to probe uninvited for a woman's intimacy. And anyway, she's right – we don't really know each other.

I'm still thinking about this as I climb the stairs, thinking that in spite of my best attempts at magnanimity, she's turning out to be something of a weird fish and therefore probably best left alone. Coldness in a woman is fine at first, it makes her seem different, special, mysterious, even desirable, but it quickly becomes tiresome if she refuses to reveal herself, or worse, if on finally revealing herself you discover there's nothing actually there.

Then, in the bathroom I see a little spot of pink urine on the toilet seat, and everything changes. It's late on a Friday afternoon, and instead of winding down for the weekend, Adrienne's stranded on an island with a painfully self conscious guy who's so needy he can't see that all she needs is a little space. *And* she's having her period.

When I come back down I find her in the kitchen. She's taken off her jacket and is making coffee. You'll have to forgive me now, but I cannot help noticing her breasts: they're endearingly small, and I'm guessing ordinarily they'd barely disturb the folds of her blouse, except they're held aloft by a tight little bra, so her décolletage peeps through the low necked tailoring – something her jacket and her scarf have until now concealed. But more of a surprise I see nestled there a pair of silver pendants, each about the size of a

sixpence. One is Celtic, the Tree of Life, and the other, more plainly, a pentagram inscribed in a circle.

She sees me looking and unconsciously pinches together the front of her blouse. "Sorry," she tells me. "I mean, what I said just now. Actually, that was very rude. Please forgive me."

"Don't worry about it. I talk too much... I wouldn't want to spend too long in my company either."

"It wasn't that. I'm just no good with people... I mean with... conversation these days. I get... confused. Tire easily. I really am sorry."

What does she mean? Is she ill?

"Well, like I said, I'm quite happy to settle in the other room."

"No, no... it's fine. It'll help to pass the time if we can chat, but you mustn't be offended if I drift off mid-sentence." She looks to the coffee. "Anyway, I'm afraid there's no milk, but there's a little sugar if you want it." Unconsciously she lets her blouse go, and I see the pendants again, this time settled more snugly. She pours boiling water into the cups and slips me a shy smile, healing the hurt at a stroke.

"Black's fine, thank you. "

"Nothing to sweeten the taste for you then?"

The taste of what, Adrienne? My life? Your rejection? The impossibility that there can ever be anything between us except my own heartache at yet another useless infatuation? I mean how metaphorical do you want me to be?

"You get used to it," I tell her. "Having nothing to sweeten the taste."

A little cryptic, a little self pitying, Phil. I don't know what she's trying to say, nor me – except that in a possibly vain sort of way I'm wanting her to see there's more to me than meets the eye, just as I know there's more to her. Those pendants... I'm not stupid; they're Neopagan symbols, and that's interesting, unless they're both meaningless fashion statements, which my intuition refuses to let me believe.

Is Adrienne a witch?

"Nothing, or no one?" she's saying.

"Hmm?"

I blush at this. It unnerves me because, again, I don't know what she means by it, or if she means anything at all and hasn't just blurted it out without thinking. But as quickly as she's asked, she's

brushing the question aside with a little shake of the head.

"Never mind," she says. "Just teasing."

No she isn't. She's asking me if I'm single. I feel strange now, as if she's sliced off the festering wart of my verbose blunderings with something very sharp, leaving things raw and bleeding. But in the blood comes out an issue of things long unsaid, of things suppressed, of deceit, folly and fancy. I'm reminded bleeding was considered a cure in olden times and I'm wondering if she can be persuaded to cut me some more.

I want to tell her there hasn't been anyone for long time. But then there's another voice reminding me how women can flavour a man's life in other ways, not so sweet, and I should tread carefully here. A woman's hidden depths are sometimes best left unexplored, lest she be exposed as a bunny-boiler.

The wind continues to stiffen, a real wintry whine to it as it presses against the windows. Unseasonable for June. They're old fashioned sash-windows throughout, quaint, but draughty, and they rattle, tapping out morse-code to one another. No doubt these will be the first to go when the property developer gets his hands on the place. Then there'll be plastic double-glazing everywhere, and laminate floors and the timeless message lost. Except there is no property developer. Only a fool would buy this place. Its future is bleak, its future is ruination, like the castle on the hill, like the wartime magazine... unless I adopt it. But why would I want to? Leven Isle has already proved to me how treacherous a place it can be, the passage to and from its inner secrets by no means always to be relied upon. No, I'm here for a reason, but it isn't to buy this house.

She looks outside at a suddenly darkening sky. "Stormy. Maybe you were right about that tidal surge."

"I don't know. I was just guessing really."

"Mr Simpson..?"

"It's *Sampson*,... or, look, just call me Phil, will you?"

She considers this, considers drawing one more step into closer familiarity. "Phil. Sorry. I'm hopeless with names. They just don't sink in these days. I'm Adrienne, by the way. I really am sorry about earlier, sorry about everything. Can we start again?"

She sinks down at the table and I join her, both of us gathering our hands around our mugs as if in prayer. To pray for what, I wonder? For grace, for forgiveness, for the wisdom not to stick my

foot in my mouth?

I drum my fingers against the mug, and my great great grandfather's ring chimes out a slow rhythm against the ceramic. I want to ask her something, something deep, something incredibly profound like: what's the secret to the meaning of my life, Adrienne? But the best I can manage is: "Have you been an estate agent long?"

From the corner of her mouth there slides a wry smile, and I breathe a sigh of relief because at least she seems receptive to idle chatter now."Calling me an estate agent is stretching the truth," she tells me. "I'm more of a trainee. But what about you? You were in the Navy? You said you'd been on ships - that sounds much more exciting."

A polite return, *and* slightly flattering? Things are looking up. "Not the Navy. I was in oil and gas – a geologist."

"You've seen the world then?"

"Some. I worked on rigs, and boats doing surveys, mostly mud-logging."

"Mud-logging?"

"Analysing core samples – looking at mud under a microscope, and logging what you see. Hence: mud-logging. But that was a long time ago. I work behind a desk these days, in Manchester."

"You prefer that?"

"Not really. I've no choice in it to be honest, and I don't know what else I'd do anyway."

"Oh?"

Wait, what's happened here? No sooner have we begun in earnest than we've steered this thing into the one area I don't want to talk about -–if only because it's such a tangled mess, one that neither counsellors, nor a line of luke-warm lovers has ever helped me make much headway with. Pills and platitudes cannot heal a soul, and I don't know Adrienne well enough to subject her to this part of me.

"Long story," I tell her.

"None of my business, you mean? Sorry."

She blinks away, chastened. She's a little sensitive, a little on guard for a potential rebuff, which is interesting considering her eagerness to rebuff others. Is it that she has learned to expect only cruelty and chastisement? Either way, you've blown it Phil, which is a pity because for a moment there, things were looking hopeful.

"I didn't mean it like that. I meant... well... just that it's a very long story." I take a nervous sip at the coffee but wince at its bitterness.

Ughhh! What the hell is that?

"It's a long way to commute from Manchester to here," she says. "Or were you thinking more of a weekend place?"

Ah,... she's giving me another chance. Thank you, Adrienne. Tread carefully now, Phil. "No, I'm looking for somewhere to settle."

"It's just that you seem an unlikely buyer for this place, that's all."

"I knew you had me clocked as a time waster."

She laughs. "Well, aren't you?"

"Not entirely, no. I'm definitely in the market for somewhere quiet, and somewhere cheap. And this place might fit the bill, if I could only make better friends with it."

It's okay... we're still talking. She's not taken offence at my unintended rebuff, not closed herself up like she could so easily have done. I've teased her back, out into the light, and I do want to tell her about that part of me because I think I might learn something by looking at myself in her reflection. But you don't reveal your scars, so quickly in fresh company – it's simply not polite. Better to maintain the illusion of your perfection for a while longer.

"You have a place to sell?" she asks.

"Yes, a big old house in Cheshire. Victorian. Six bedrooms. Ugly as sin, but worth quite a bit, really – mainly on account of the post-code. I've never liked it, but it turns out to be the only sensible thing I've ever invested in. I want to down-size, clear a couple of hundred thousand to live on, which, if I'm really frugal, should see me through until my company pension kicks in."

"Quit the rat race? I get it now. Lucky you!"

"Sounds corny when you put it like that. But why not?"

"Sure, why not? I'd do it myself if I could. You must really hate your job, then?"

"Well, it's true I've been in urgent need of a change of scene for a while now."

"Are you sure it's not just a mid-life crisis? Why not buy a sports car instead? It would be cheaper."

Teasing? Yes... this is really good. "I tried that. It was a bright red open-top. Wanted one since I was a teenager, but couldn't afford

the insurance back then. Waited twenty years then discovered they're only any good for short distances, sports cars. Too uncomfortable for the long haul. So... dull and corporate, that's me – a plain black, rep-mobile. Short on character, but goes the distance."

"Are we still talking about cars?"

I laugh, then blush. My, she's perky when roused! But she's right – is that what I've become? A dull corporate gent? I suppose I have. I'm dressed like one, aren't I? What happened to me? Six months after graduating, I was mapping in the Kalahari, and I spent the rest of my twenties living out of a rucksack. I was indestructible. Now, by day, I'm like every other corporate arsehole, shuffling papers between meetings, and by night I'm like a wounded fox looking for a quiet earth to curl up in and die.

"Well, they say you can tell a lot about a man by the car he drives."

She laughs. "Exactly. I saw yours. It looked about as exciting as mine."

"But not so well cared for."

"Well, that's me, Phil. I put on a good show. But I assure you there are ice-cream wrappers and crisp packets under the floor-mats."

"I don't believe that for a minute. And I shall check when we leave here in the morning."

She laughs again, then looks at me for a while, and I admit it's beginning to feel very good, this thing between us. "But if you're used to the city life," she says, "won't you find it a bit too quiet out here? Too much of a shock. You need to ease yourself in gradually – perhaps you could try living in a rural village for a bit. I can recommend some places to view, if you like."

"I was wondering about that. I was born in a quiet village, not far from here actually, in the Bowland Hills. Drayton,... you know it?"

"Yes, I know it. My Aunt lives there. One road in, one road out, one pub, one tea-shop, and a lovely old bridge over a sleepy river. So, you're a local boy?"

We have a connection! But don't push it. Don't ask for her aunt's name, Phil, because you will not know it. You don't know anyone in Drayton any more.

"A local boy, yes. Though, growing up there I couldn't wait to

leave, to travel the world. I managed it too, but I've not always been to the nicest of places. And sometimes, the places I was sent, they were even more isolated than this. I once lived in a shack on an uninhabited island in the Caribbean for a year. So maybe I *could* handle it."

Be careful not to brag, Phil. This is not a woman who'd respond to bullshit.

"Really? You liked it?"

"I did. Truth be told, I'm not that good with people either. So yes... maybe solitude suits me."

"Or... you could always move back to Drayton. I think we have a couple of properties on our books that might suit you."

"No, not Drayton. Surely it's too expensive now. When my mother died, her house sold for a fortune, and it sits empty most of the time now."

"Don't tell me, some rich wanker's second home?"

I can't believe Adrienne has just said the word 'wanker'... or was it banker? but at least she said it beautifully. "Yes,... it seems a waste."

"So... your dad still around?"

"No, he passed when I was a kid."

"Ah... both gone then. I'm sorry. Brother's, sisters?"

"None."

"Hmm... let me read your headline."

"My headline?"

"Corporate wage-slave seeks island retreat?"

"Ha! When you put it like that, it doesn't ring true. Retreat yes. Island?... I don't know. Rural retreat sounds better, sounds more realistic."

"Plus this is hardly the Caribbean, Phil. You wouldn't have all that nice weather. No sunbathing, and no dusky maidens to entertain you? Just grey skies and grey seas, and the wind whistling round the chimney pots."

She's good with words - paints a beautifully gloomy picture of it. "If I may say so, Ms Divine, you're not doing a very good job of selling this place to me."

"Well, it's really not you. You couldn't raise a family, could you? How would you get the kids to school?"

Talk of offspring? Is she feeling out the extent of my personal baggage now? "Never had any. Never married. And too old to start

now."

I'm virgin territory, Adrienne... well not "virginal", of course, but I might as well be these days. What I'm saying is I'm all yours. But then a man of my age, never married... well, he's either not the marrying kind, or there's something wrong with him.

"And then what would you do out here," she asks. "I mean, alone, other than sit and stare at the sea all day?"

"I don't know, but Mrs Fox managed it. There *is* something about the place. You can feel it. Family? Husband? Memories? Something to look back upon from your rocking chair. Something worth keeping pictures of."

She's rotating her coffee cup, her gaze lost in the steam as it rises. She looks far away. Wistful. "Yes... that's worth something."

"Except like you said, I'd be on my own out here."

"Oh... I don't know. You'd always have Mrs Fox for company."

"Now you're making it sound creepy."

She gives me a mischievous grin. "Imagine! A dark, stormy night, midwinter, cut off by the tide, and you alone in that big double bed, listening to the creaking and groaning of the old house. It's more or less certain to be haunted, you know?"

"By Mrs Fox?"

"Maybe. But there are also rumours of... well... they say hereabouts..."

"What?" I lean closer to catch her words, which she softens deliberately for effect, and I realise too late she's teasing me.

She smiles. "Gotcha!"

Oh, I do like this side of her. But she's right – that's what it's like, being alone. On the up side, you've only got yourself to think about, yourself to please, but on the downside it can take you places inside your head you don't always want to go. I'm okay with ghosts, it's dying that worries me, dying alone – but then your demise is as likely to go unnoticed in the city as it would be out here. So what's the difference?

She takes a sip of her coffee. "Ughhh! That's horrible."

"I know. Past its best, I think."

"A bit like me then."

Cry for help? Interesting, but I refuse to be drawn. Adrienne Divine is anything but past her best.

Chapter 9

The point of anything

We're quiet for a while, sipping at our coffee, weathering its bitterness for no other reason than it's hot, and the kitchen is growing cold. We seem to have become so bound up in our conversation suddenly, we've forgotten the fire steadily building in the lounge.

Adrienne rises and turns to tip her dregs into the sink. She has lovely hips, and a slender waist that invites a man's hands. She also has rather a prominent and peachy derrière, which does wonders for me, but I peel my eyes away, try to drown my thoughts in the dark and bitter dregs of my own cup.

In doing so I'm reminded how it's only a week ago I was in London, a group of us from the office, sent to entertain an odious entourage of prospective clients, and how the evening had ended up with a naked girl gyrating her own peachy derrière in my lap – not so voluptuous as Adrienne's...

All right, which one of my daemons invited that one in?

Not you Gramps, nor you, I should think, Amelia. So it's another ghost stalking me, making me own up to such things, and inviting the contrast. I take a breath and inwardly remind my spooks that I will respond only to constructive overtures here. And in response, the memory of the nightclub takes a firmer hold – the smell of cheap perfume, the garish strobe lights, the sweltering heat and the dreadful fuck-me musak...

Okay, okay, let's see where it goes...

In my defence I should add I'd never been to such a place before, and I urge you to gloss over the crude imagery, because I'm only too ready to join with your unease at such an Hogarthian spectacle. I could add I was only there to make up the numbers – not exactly part of the management team – but my age and experience somehow counting in my favour, adding up to a safe pair of hands.

It was my more urbane colleagues who were familiar with such venues, they who had steered us there after a meal fortified with strong drink. And the clients, shall we say Eastern European gentlemen with government connections and a distasteful lack of modesty, had seemed to expect it.

For myself I'd felt ashamed, also embarrassed to be among men

with facial expressions suggestive of barely suppressed orgasm. So far as I'm concerned sex is a private matter between consenting adults, not a fit subject for group entertainment, nor for that matter demonstrating who amongst my Alpha inclined companions was the least Beta. But then I'm middle aged. Had I been a younger man I might have felt differently. As it was I'd found it tiresome. No, that's not right; I'd found it upsetting.

The girl had turned, perhaps sensing my unease – hard to tell her age, so made-up she was, as if to disguise her true identity – but I imagined she should have been at college, trading off her intelligence, rather than in this semi-brothel, trading off her painted nudity. It was a nudity that spoke nothing to me. It had seemed stripped of meaning, a babe, pared down to an asexual husk, her every move, practised ad nauseam in the mirror – a mere caricature of lust.

Repulsive.

So the girl turned to see why it was she could not please me, what it was she was doing wrong. And then she saw the redness in my eyes, and it triggered the same in her. She felt ashamed. We looked about us, at the booze and the money, the girls stripped of dignity, and the men too, buying what they seemed no longer capable of nurturing in themselves for free, and I had a sense of witnessing something from the fall of the Roman Empire.

There were no Gods, no Goddesses. Only lost souls, like worms in a bucket, squirming about for anyone who came conveniently to hand. Oh, and a middle aged guy on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

I gave her money in case she got into trouble with the management, and prayed she was not so lost to this way of life, she could not get out of it. She could not look me in the eye, but went in search of other punters. As for me, I went and hid in the toilets, but my presence there was irksome for the cocaine snorters, so I feigned illness on account of excess booze, of which I'd actually partaken very little, and took a taxi back to the hotel.

On the scale of Alpha, I rank somewhere around Zeta minus. Macho, I am not – definitely more of a girly kind of guy. With a bit of luck they'd think twice before inviting me on such a sleazy junket again.

We'd travelled back up north next morning by train, six men, five hung over and barely able to recall the night before, one of

them remembering it only too well. I was on the outside of the group, on account of not having survived the night intact and for refusing the team building experience of having ones genitals rubbed by a stranger's bare buttocks. But we had the contract just the same. Permits for exploration, for the rape of a pristine mountainside, and the forced displacement of several peasant communities, whose non-tenured fate it was to be sitting on a fortune in copper reserves.

A week ago.

Is that why I'm here now? Reacting to that? Hiding from that? No,.. this has been coming for a long time. This has been coming for a decade, ever since I sank behind that desk in the first place and started asking awkward questions of existence and mortality.

"Hmm?"

"Hobbies? Interests?" she's saying. "Or do men not have hobbies any more?"

What else have I missed here? We're discussing *pastimes* now? How did that happen? "Em... sure, I have hobbies."

"Such as?"

She's looking at me expectantly and seems really interested, but I'm on the defensive, having learned to be guarded about my softer side. No one at the office knows I have hobbies. Better to discuss Real Ale pubs, and the visible panty lines of office girls, than hobbies. It would be professional suicide – even more so than refusing the favours of a lap-dancer.

"I... I like to draw."

"What?"

There, you see? I've surprised her. Stopped her in her tracks. *Surely only children like to draw, Phil? Crayons and sugar-paper you mean?*

"You know... pencil and paper. I dabble with colour now and then, watercolour mostly, also I've just discovered finger-painting on my iPad. What? You think I'm kidding?"

"No. No. I... I thought you were going to say golf or something – most men play golf."

"Golf? Well... I do play golf, now and then. But I've always thought of it as an extension of the job – networking, that sort of thing. I wouldn't really call it a hobby. Haven't played for ages though... and I never really took to networking."

"Oh? Why's that?"

She knows the answer. Why does she invite it this way? Is she asking me to reveal my softest side? Is it a dare? Is it a test I must pass before I am deemed worthy of a glimpse of her own sweetness? So be it: "Well, you never reveal your true self to such people, do you? They'd run a mile. Plus, it's pointless for an introvert, networking I mean – to say nothing of excruciatingly painful. Personally, I'd sooner stick pins in my eyes."

I see her brows twitch – though not in alarm. She's thinking, wondering, reading the spaces between my words, wondering what it is I really want to say to her, what it is I really want to confess.

I'm through with everything, Adrienne. I've lived getting on for half a century and understand it not one jot. The ground might as well open up and swallow me now. So let me just this once lay my head against the soft pillow of your breast, and go to sleep.

There's usually no sense of an easy fit, sliding your key into the lock of a woman this way, and mine is such an odd key it always refuses to turn, to the extent I rarely try it these days, in the assumption all doors are similarly denied me. But I can usually feel it, sense it – a flicker of the eyes, a tightening of the jaw – tiny things that we can all read, subliminally. But Adrienne is still smiling, a softly quizzical look as she leans back upon the counter. Her fingers are at her bosom toying with the pendants, and she puts her weight on one foot, while hooking the other behind her shapely ankle. Submission. Coyness. She seems to be giving me permission to go on.

Try me, Phil, she's saying. Turn your key in me and see what happens.

"So..." she says. "You draw scenes, and portraits and things?"

"Anything."

"And you... exhibit?"

"What? No, I'm not that serious. It's just a hobby. I've got a Flickr account. I like to scan my drawings and post them online. Does that count as exhibiting?"

"Depends if you have much of a following."

"Are you kidding? There must be a billion Flickr accounts. Posting stuff anonymously like that – it's like spitting in the ocean."

"Then why do it?" She's not belittling my interest here. Her tone suggests she's genuinely intrigued, that my answer will mean something to her.

"It's a good question, and really I don't know. But even trained

artists die in obscurity. I'm not doing it to become rich and famous, if that's what you mean – they're just drawings after all."

She's nodding slowly, teasing out my words, also reading the words between. I've shown her my foolishness, shown her the child in me – the little boy who likes to draw pictures and she's still looking thoughtful, looking interested. I could talk to her like this all day, but how much am I misinterpreting? Is she really interested, or merely bemused? Heedless to the consequences, I plough on:

"There doesn't have to be a point to everything, does there? After all, when it comes down to it, what's the point of *anything*? Even a lifetime's industry and a million pounds in the bank means nothing when you're going up the chimney at the crematorium."

She looks more closely, and I imagine her seeking the deeper levels of me now, the levels no one has explored before. I'm a little discomfited by this. I mean, though it's something I've wanted all my life, could I even cope with a woman who took me seriously?

"I'll go along with that," she says. "We're too obsessed with everything we do having to count in a materialistic way. I'd argue your drawings are likely to mean more to you, personally, if you keep them to yourself, or share them only with people you know."

"You think it's a weakness then? Posting them online? Like showing off or something? I mean, you can tell me what you think and I promise not to be offended – it's something I've wondered about myself."

"Well... I'm sure it's not showing off, or even subconsciously courting fame. You're looking for something far more imperishable, Phil, and God help you."

"Something *imperishable*?"

She nods "You're seeking your own immortality."

"Immortality?" I laugh, but she's right, that's *exactly* what it is. I want to leave a lasting mark, something that'll outlive me, something more than the bland minutes of a meeting that has me party to a lot of things my private non-corporate self does not approve of.

"I used to keep a blog," she tells me."It was all nonsense – just self conscious ramblings on the meaning of life. But I found I'd reached the stage where I was no longer doing it for the one person who was really important – myself. I ended up doing it to please this imaginary crowd of followers, and when that happens you're

lost. You learn nothing from it any more."

"You kept a blog? Is it still up there?"

She gives me a demure smile. "Last time I looked, yes. But you can forget it, Phil. I'm not telling you my pseudonym. Listen, what I mean is we're all the same, and for anyone who thinks about it, there's nothing more obscure than an individual human being, so we're driven to make a name for ourselves in some way, to make ourselves *less* obscure. We post pictures online, we keep blogs, we dream of winning the X Factor."

"So, maybe the answer's in the other direction. We should be like all those hermits and seers, and embrace our solitude, take time to contemplate our inner selves."

She leans back, something sagely about her now. She's already thought about this, already walked this road. I see it in her eyes as she continues to tease out my thoughts. Then she blinks away, retreats into herself, goes to ground among her more safely guarded secrets. I want to follow. I want her to lead me through the labyrinth of her thoughts, because I was right: there's something really interesting in there, but at the same time it's a thing that holds her aloof from the world.

I ease back in my chair, suddenly reacting to the melancholy depths we seem to have found ourselves in. "Sorry, Adrienne. I'm beginning to sound a bit,... morose."

"Yes. You hid it so well, but if you must know it was talk of yourself going up the chimney at the crematorium that finally gave you away."

There's a sweetness to her comeback. Don't worry, she's saying, you can be morose if you want. I laugh at her joke, and she likes it that I laugh. So then I try to read ahead, a year, two, maybe ten – imagine myself having this same conversation with her and testing the soundness of the boards I'm stepping on, trying to judge if they'll still support the weight of me, or if by then she'll have grown tired and there'll just be blank eyes staring back, eyes that are tired of the sight of me.

"I'm talking too much," I tell her. "Your turn."

She's puzzled, "My turn?"

"What's your answer to the obscurity of the individual life, and the transience of existence?"

She smiles. "You're asking me for the meaning of life? I'm flattered you even think I have a shot at it. But let me answer by

asking you this: would it change anything for you if you knew with absolute certainty this was not the only life you had, that you'd led lives before, and will lead other lives after this one, that the immortality you seek with your drawings, and me with my blog, is a pale and transient thing compared with the immortality we already possess, but remain entirely unconscious of?"

What does she mean by this? Is she professing a religious belief? Life eternal? Reincarnation? I'd not taken her for a churchgoer, especially not wearing those pendants. No this sounds like something else – an intellectual hypothesis, put up for the sake of argument perhaps? Okay then... lets play with that: "But you could never know for certain, could you?"

"Granted," she says. "Not usually. But if you *could?*"

"Then it would answer everything. There'd be no mystery any more, and you'd stop worrying if you were doing the right thing all the time."

"Would you? Or would you still be asking the same questions: What's it all for? Where do I fit in? It would just be a bigger mystery, Phil. What I suppose I'm trying to say is I don't think there's an answer, not one we can grasp at this level anyway. It's in the search, in the *asking* that we find our meaning. Life's a journey, not a destination."

I'm conscious of staring at her, of observing the microscopic perfection of her – her unusually long lashes, the downy hairs on her neck, and lip, the breathtaking intricacy of her iris. I know it for what it is now, this haunted feeling. The house is filled with the presence of a particular kind of life, and a more genuine kind of love than I've been used to in a long time. Its face is a warm light burning in the hallway at the end of a winter's day, it's a fire crackling cosily in the grate, and it's someone waiting for my return, helping me from my coat, a coat soaked with the storms of delusion, and she's easing it from me, easing off the debilitating weight of it, hanging it up for me, settling me down. *Listen, she's saying. I have something to tell you, it's the secret to everything,... are you ready?*

A woman.

Of course, it's a woman. *It's always been a woman, Phil.*

For all my talk of retreat into misanthropic isolation, I'm a man who really needs women, even if my expectations are unrealistic, and my desires usually unfulfilled – because there's no disguising

the awkward fact not one of them has yet come close to telling me the secret. However, I'm perfectly aware I shall go on courting the impossible for as long as I live.

But you find women in places where there are people. You don't find them by withdrawing yourself from life, by sequestering yourself on a deserted isle, sprouted from the unsavoury quicksands off the Lancashire coast. There are no girl-Fridays here. Indeed right now, there is only Adrienne, which means if I should return to Leven Isle, I will find it a very lonely place, robbed of even the mysterious meaning it possesses now, because all the meaning I've invented thus far lies in her.

It is not the house I'm in thrall to.

It's Adrienne.

All right- perhaps you already knew that. But then you have that third person advantage of seeing further than the end of your nose. For me, this is a revelation, both the simple fact of it, and the realisation of how deeply I've fallen.

"Forgive me Adrienne, but you don't sound like an estate agent."

"I told you," she says. "I'm not."

I try to swallow, but my mouth is dry. I'm in real trouble here because the stakes just got much higher. If this woman cannot undertake to change my life, now, this very night, I'll be devastated in the morning when she walks away.

Chapter 10

Storm Front

She excuses herself and makes for the bathroom again. Meanwhile, I step outside to cool my head, take time to breathe some fresh air, to remind myself of the awful loneliness of this place. And why I cannot live here.

The light's becoming harsher by the minute, the contrasts deepening, the sky darkening to an ominous blue-grey now, bleeding almost to black in the west, from where a fierce wind is roaring in. The sea's a murky grey with big waves, filthy foam topped and thundering inshore. There's no trace of our drive across, but for the forlorn little outcrop of Rescue Crag, spray tossing and teasing around its base. How could it have withstood the millennia like that? It looks so fragile.

Watching the sea, I feel myself hypnotised, my mind fast regressing of its own accord to a point ten years ago, and three thousand miles away. The weather has that same dour look about it, the same as on that afternoon we'd set out for the rig – me thinking it was hardly the best of weather for flying, but trusting in the pilot, and trusting the technology. I mean, they're marvellous machines these helicopters, aren't they? Well, I suppose they are, when you look after them, when the maintenance crews aren't bullied into penny pinching, and the pilots aren't under pressure to deliver you up for service like cattle, whatever nature's mood.

I shake myself clear before the memory takes a proper hold. I really don't want to be thinking about that just now.

I can't see the mainland. It's lost in a haze of spray suddenly thrown up by the sea. It's as if we've been cast adrift and we're floating helplessly at the mercy of the storm. The run of the waves gives the island a peculiar sense of motion, like it's accelerating away from the mainland, heading out into the deep ocean. I'd not been prepared for the sense of isolation the sea implies at high water and I'm taking a good, hard look at it, when a fork of lightning cracks open the western sky. It pulses briefly, blue-white, momentarily lifting the grey of the afternoon. Then follows a report, like a gunshot, then a longer deep throated rumble. Gulls are tossed about like blown leaves, rolling and riding the mad air, inland, screeching their alarm.

I tuck my head into the wind and hurry in the direction of the beach, but it's not the beach I want to see. It's the stone. I pause beside it running my eyes over the ancient marks, remembering too the poise of Adrienne's fingers as she'd stroked them – something lingering, something deeply thoughtful in her touch. I try to emulate her now and I wonder again about the tree of life, and the pentangle she wears.

I was right! There really *is* something about her. She's not an elf, but if she *is* a witch, then she deals in a kind of magic, doesn't she? But what kind of witch? There are dark ones and light ones, depending on the path they've chosen, and it's only the fact I'm in love with her that persuades me she cannot be on anything other than the path of light. Surely then she might know something of the world beyond what I've seen and felt? And what was all that just now? *If you knew for sure, if you were fully aware of your own immortal nature?*

From my vantage point I look back at the island – the castle dramatically poised on the high-ground, commanding a position above vast swathes of wind combed grassland. And there's the cottage, a plume of grey smoke rising only a short way from its stout chimney before being torn into mad, dancing spectres. And in the cottage is a woman. And this woman means something... knows something. And we're alone here, the two of us stranded between the tides. There has to be a meaning in that. The meaning is to be found in the journey, she said, and our journeys have brought us here.

Down at the beach the waves are dirty and ugly now – a muddy, creamy, foamy brine, pounding on shingle. There are no sands visible. And out in the distance, set against the black of the horizon, I see a tight huddle of great white mushroom clouds, thunder heads rising, trailing long grey curtains of rain. It's going to be a bad one. Indeed, it resembles more a tropical storm, or an inbound hurricane, which is ridiculous of course, but like I told you, the sea and I are not the best of friends, especially up close, like this.

"It's looking a bit rough, Gramps."

"Aye, tha'll be gerrin thisen wet if tha's not careful."

This is a natural exchange to me, the voice at once familiar, in my head, responding to my prompt, and in the vernacular, though I've not spoken that language since I was a kid, not since University

knocked it out of me. And who speaks dialect now, except in jest?

"Gramps?"

He's at my elbow, filling his pipe, staring out to sea with glittering grey eyes, and he's reading the weather. But then he's gone, because I don't see him when I look directly at him – only out of the corner of my eye, and only when my mood and the more subtle tides of imagination permit it.

"What am I looking at here, Gramps? Am I really supposed to buy this house?"

No reply. All I'm getting is this feeling about Adrienne. It's a vulnerability, a life poised in the balance and containing much by way of treasure, but fallen somehow, and broken, lying in the dust. And my hand is still frozen mid-air, half way to steadying her on the stairs – afraid to go all the way and simply touch her. I'm afraid she'll misinterpret my intentions, mistake my desire to steady her for the more usual desire to possess her. But there she is, on the ground, her knees bleeding from the fall, surrounded by the shards of something old and irreparably shattered, and she's looking at me, wanting me to extend that hand, and haul her up. She needs that hand, but for now distrusts it, because to be possessed by it, possessed by *a man* – to iron his shirts and darn his socks – would surely destroy the very thing in her I admire so much.

"She doesn't need me, Gramps. It's me who's the needy one. I'd only smother her with my usual infantile fantasies about women – turning them into elves and pixies and flaxen haired goddesses."

Still, it won't go away, this image. I close my eyes tight, but now the inner eye lights up and she's still there, every detail of her remembered from my earlier scrutiny. And she's looking at me, mute, impassive – just her hand outstretched to convey the need.

The wounded healer.

Needing me.

Another crack of lightning jolts me to my senses. Imagination can be a powerful thing - E.S.P., precognition, even talk of psychokinesis is not beyond the pale for me these days. To a narrow minded kind of materialist all of this is nonsense, but as with every kind of posturing, the facts of the matter are usually different to what is supposed. That said, I'm careful not to place Gramps, or more lately the mysterious Amelia Fox, like these visions of Adrienne, any further than the insides of my head, even though I know the mind transcends the brain. But any more than that for

now, and I'd be lost – you too most likely, so I promise I'll tread carefully, not drag you too far outside your comfort zone.

Adrienne's talk of our immortal natures has touched a nerve. It's a knowledge all Romantics crave, to the extent that it puts us at the mercy of charismatic charlatans, be they religious or secular – likewise all those charismatic and smugly atheist naysayers, their heads caught up their own arses in a physical science already a century out of date. But she's right; to know, *to really know,* would simplify nothing, only create a bigger mystery. But that's fine by me. Indeed I crave it, because in the modern, material world, there is no mystery, no point, no meaning to anything at all.

God is dead, but that doesn't mean god, or however you define it, can't be resurrected. How we do that in the modern word though... well, that's the biggest mystery of them all. But if we can manage it, and in a way so foolproof it quells all rational objection, well... our obscurity dissolves, and we bask in the glory of existential celebrity, nestling safe in love once more, and at the very centre of our universe.

Chapter 11

The Witch

I burst into the cottage with the weather on my tail and lean back upon the door, pressing the weather out. She's in the sitting room, warming her hands by the fire, one foot resting lightly on the hearth, the split of her skirt revealing a muscular leg all the way up to the bend of her knee. I like the poise of her – she's elegant, and sexy.

There's a shyness about us when I enter, and something old fashioned in me keeps me standing until she lowers herself to a threadbare footstool, on which she then perches side-saddle. "Is everything all right?" she asks.

"There looks to be a terrific storm heading right this way."

I realise I'm breathless. She picks up on this and frowns. "Is it really as bad as that?"

"A rough night for sure."

"Better nail the hatches shut then." She thinks for a moment. "I'm sorry, Phil. I hope you didn't think me too strange earlier – all that talk of our immortal natures. I didn't mean to sound like an evangelical preacher."

"I wasn't thinking that. Not wearing those pendants anyway."

She looks down and fishes out the pentagram and the tree of life from her bosom. "You have sharp eyes, Mr Simpson. And there was me thinking you were just staring at my tits. But you're right. If I'd been born into an earlier time, I'd most likely have been hung at Lancaster, along with all the others for wearing these."

"The others?"

"The witch trials. Though I doubt any of those poor wretches were in fact witches."

For the record here, it was she who first mentioned the word *witch*.

Something's moving. I feel the floor swaying like the deck of a ship. Through the French window, I see the sea, feel the coming storm as if the island itself were tossed upon it. I take a breath, but it's ragged and I have to sit down to steady myself.

"I'm sorry" she says. "People react in different ways when they find out about me. I'm not exactly out of the broom closet yet, but if people try to pin me down I no longer cover it up."

"It's not that, Adrienne. Really. I'm just a bit jittery about the sea, that's all."

She smiles, a slow smile, a reading sort of smile. She looks inside of me and sees now, if not literal pieces of the wreckage, then at least an abstract pattern from which she can divine their traces. "I thought there must be something," she says.

"Oh?"

"I saw the way you were holding onto the passenger seat when I drove us over." She queries me again with a little shake of her head, brows raised, reeling me in. "I've blundered into your long story, haven't I? You're working in an office now because you can't do the rigs any more, and you can't do them because?..." She reads something in me, divines the yawning chasm opening at her feet and steps back. "Sorry. It's none of my business."

"It's okay. You're right. I went through a long spell of working on rigs. It's not for everyone, but I used to enjoy it. Then the chopper taking us out this one time had to ditch. It was a heavy sea. The conditions were pretty awful. I lost my nerve after that."

She takes this in slowly, eyes turned inwards as she plays back my words, weighs them, reading the tone of my voice for clues to the words I've left out. "Were you hurt?"

"No,.. not really. I... I spent several days in rubber boat, waiting to be rescued, but the storm made it difficult."

She nods slowly, listening, comprehending. Physically okay, but psychologically bruised. "A storm at sea. Like this one? You think it's coming for you again? Is that it?"

"Maybe. Something like that. Just the sound of a wild sea's enough to scramble my head."

"It must have been terrifying for you."

"I've never been more afraid. You practise for these things of course. The training's all very strict, but even so, they're not generally survivable, not in a heavy sea like that. It's just a tick in a box. You've done the training, the company's done its best for you. Done its bit."

"How long before they found you?"

"Three days. After that I just couldn't do the rigs any more. I can't complain – the company did its best by me, found me other work. So now I study data in an office. I sit in meetings, arguing over research funding. And I'm home every evening by six – except on the odd occasion when I'm asked to make up numbers on

excruciating corporate hospitality junkets, which, for a misanthrope like me are about as low as it gets."

She thinks a while, her gaze still upon me, as if computing the likely extent of my neuroses, and then she says: "So you're a party-pooper, and you hate your job. Me too. But listen, there have been settlements on Leven Isle since Neolithic times. It's always been occupied. Why do you think that is?"

"I don't know. Fertile pasture? Easily fortified?"

"Exactly. It's safe. Twice a day the tide comes in, and when it does, you don't have to worry about watching your back against those bastards on the mainland any more. It becomes your place. Your space. Your sanctuary. Its,.. perfectly,... safe. And so are we, while we're here."

I hadn't taken her for a philosopher, or a psychologist, but she clearly has both in her, and Gramps is suddenly telling me I'm nearer to the mark here than I think with this. I feel comforted, as much by the authoritative way she speaks now as by the logic of her argument.

She remains on the surface a little aloof, but something inside of her is wanting to explore the damage in me. I don't know why she would want to do this, other than the fact that she can, and she's a kindly soul. Don't ask me how I know, maybe Gramps is telling me this as well, and really I don't care if I'm making it all up, because sometimes even imagining such a thing is enough. And submitting myself to her might be all I need. At some point you have to give the woman the mantle of your Goddess and see how well it fits. Usually it slips right off and she presses it carelessly into the mud with her shoe, but you never know.

And thus far Adrienne carries it well.

"I'm sorry," she says.

"Sorry?"

"I didn't mean to open this up. Tell me to shut up if you don't want to talk about it, but how many were lost? I mean, I take it you weren't alone on that helicopter?"

"There were six of us. I was the only one found alive."

She closes her eyes as she takes this in, but I don't want her to feel the pain of that disaster. It's done now, a long time ago. All I want are the answers. "When you ditch, you're supposed to wait until the chopper's almost flooded - otherwise you can't open the doors, because of the pressure difference. I was by the door, on the

upside, as the chopper rolled and went under. I think I did everything right, but I keep asking myself: did I wait too long before opening the hatch? And if I'd been a couple of seconds faster, would more of us have got out?

"As for me, I bobbed up right next to the raft. It had already inflated, and the motion of the sea more or less tipped me into it. I was lucky. What you said just now, about it being safe here – thank you."

"Well," she gives me a wry smile. "When the tide comes in through the windows you may feel differently." And then: "I really am sorry Philip." Then a shadow passes over her and she says: "I don't drive in the dark. Not even as a passenger. You may have been wondering about that, wondering why I've not suggested you drive us back at low water. I'm only saying this so you know you're not alone with your neuroses. When it comes to neuroses, I wrote the book, believe me. You're scared of stormy seas, and with good reason. I'm scared of being in a car at night. Really I couldn't do it. You'd have to sedate me."

Ah! The first concrete clue to what lies beneath! And there's more to it than vanity and contact lenses. "You were in an accident?"

She nods, but offers nothing more.

"So,... the story about the contact lenses?"

"Oh, that was true,.. they're in my cabinet at home, but then they always are. I never wear them during the day, telling myself I can manage perfectly well without them. Vanity, I suppose. And I'm always home before dark of course." She smiles. "I suppose I'm like the reverse of a vampire, whatever that might be..."

There's a period of silence, punctuated by the flash and rumble of the approaching storm. She hugs herself and gazes out through the window at the show. I do the same, but I'm not watching the storm, I'm watching Adrienne in the periphery of my vision, too stimulated by her presence to let things rest for long: "So, both our evenings ruined then? What would you normally be doing tonight?"

I want to hear her speak. It doesn't matter what we talk about – even the timbre of her voice can heal me now.

"Oh... hot bath," she says. "Bottle of wine, ready meal for one, and with luck, bed by ten with a good book. Except it's around the full moon of course, in which case I'd be out on my broom-stick."

I rather like the sound of it... except for that ready meal course.

As for the broom stick, she's just testing my reaction.

"And you?" she asks.

Me? Rose and Crown, corner table for one. A meal, served by a goldilocks-like demi-goddess – flaxen haired – but old enough to be my daughter. A pint of beer, then home. Scented joss-stick in the conservatory, meditation, then draw, and write. Yes I write – how else do you think these words were strung together? What else? Book and bed by ten? Read until drowsy. Yes... book and bed sounds nice. I'll do that next week and think of Adrienne doing it too.

She's still waiting for her answer. Have I drifted off? "Em,... much the same as you these days. Except for the broomstick of course."

"Of course, though I suspect you know a little more about modern witchcraft than you're letting on."

"I wouldn't count on that."

She indicates the pendants. "You knew what these were."

"Like I said, I read a lot."

"Then you know I'm not going to turn you into a frog?"

"It might be an improvement if you could."

She laughs.

"I could do that here," I tell her.

"Do what?"

"Reading, cooking, contemplating."

"You cook?"

Did I say cook? I did... was that you Gramps? Ah, I see she likes the thought of that: a man cooking! Be careful though, don't go too far with this or she'll think you're bragging, or worse, that you're like one of those pretentious TV chefs, pontificating over mashed potato.

"And donkeys." Did I just say donkeys? Yes I did,... arghhh! Thanks a lot Gramps. But keep going, it' s too late to cover that one up now: "I'd keep donkeys. You know... rescue them?"

"Donkeys? You're having me on, right?" She's hooked now, suppressing a chuckle. She either thinks I'm mad, or interesting. Let's hope it's interesting.

"Not at all. The Leven Isle Donkey Sanctuary has a ring to it. And I've always wanted a dog. Two dogs, in fact, A pair of Collies. And cats. Lots of cats. They could have the run of the island. It would be heaven for them, and company for me."

She's laughing now, gentle, good-natured. And I'm laughing with her, relieved to have steered us away from the subject of witchcraft, away from the unfortunate associated thought of Adrienne's naked bottom dancing around a fire – and other men gazing at it.

"Oh,... Phil, that sounds lovely. Except for the cats. I *hate* cats."

"You do? Okay, no cats."

What do I mean by this? I'm blushing suddenly. I've as good as said, stay with me, Adrienne. Share this house with me. Let's run away together, to Leven Isle... and that's stupid because I already know how this is going to end: she'll drop me off at my car tomorrow and I'll be lucky if we so much as shake hands. Then I'll be sitting down at my desk on Monday morning, just the same, contemplating the crap in my inbox, like I always do.

Never mind. Another twenty years of that and I'm done.

Suddenly the Leven Isle Donkey Sanctuary sounds inviting.

I mean, how difficult could it be?

Chapter 12

Poetry and the People's Friend

"So,... " she says, and she draws the word out, drags it like a net through the depths of her unconscious, looking for another current on which to change direction. "More... coffee?"

"No thanks."

"I don't blame you. It was dreadful, wasn't it? I ruin everything. My mother says I can't even boil an egg."

Ah!... There goes another of her blind thrusts, bursting out of that shell she wraps herself in. A disapproving mother? Is that the extent of her troubles? That, and a suspiciously understated car-crash, one that rendered her so traumatised she is unable to travel by night? It might just be enough, but Gramps is whispering again, releasing images, moods, and other subliminal intimations, all of which suggests there's far more bubbling up inside of her even than that. And I'll wager it's something that makes my brush with death seem tame.

"The coffee is clearly past its best. Hardly your fault."

"You're such a gentleman." She gives me a little twinkle, then slaps her thighs impatiently. "But what are we going to do to pass the time? We can't just sit here."

Oh, but I was thinking I could do just that, sit here quite happily with Adrienne, watch the storm coming in, watch the light drain from the sky and the night coming on, then feel the amber glow of the fire on my face. I see Gramps in the arm-chair now, settling down with his pipe, Amelia knitting... a feel of comfort and loving reassurance welling up through the cracks. Nostalgia, is it? Compassion? It feels like the house is wrapping its arms around me, settling me down for a story. The story of Adrienne.

"Do you want to watch TV?" she asks.

No, I don't, but how to say that without sounding churlish – especially if she wants to watch? I mean, she might be missing her Corrie or her Emmerdale. "Not with a storm coming," I suggest. "In fact, maybe we should disconnect the aerial."

"Good thinking. It would be bad enough explaining how I managed to strand a client, without having to explain how the cottage burned down while I was here as well." She crosses to the TV and yanks the cable from the back of the set. "I can't say I'm very

fond of the T.V., anyway."

Nicely played, Phil. I'm relieved to hear it. We are kindred spirits again! Is this really possible, or am I making her up?

"Me neither. Never watch it."

"Not even sport? I thought all men watched sport."

"Never been very sporty. Watching or taking part. I'd rather go for a long walk on my own."

She laughs. "Okay, I get the picture. You can stop colouring it in for me. But what shall we do? What did you do on your tropical island in that bamboo hut?"

"It wasn't bamboo. It was quite a nice hut, really. All mod cons. I used to do my drawings – I have a lot of drawings from those times. We used to play cards. Mostly we'd read."

"We?"

"I wasn't always alone. Sometimes I shared it with colleagues."

"Any dusky maidens?"

"Afraid not. Though sometimes the company paid for... well,.. ladies of the evening – unofficially of course – but it was never my cup of tea. I don't know why I told you that. Sorry."

Suddenly, I'm thinking back to last Friday again, still hurting.

"I'm glad to hear you managed to decline such favours," she says. "Though I'm not sure I believe you."

"I'm sure the other guys thought I was a pussy for saying no."

"Then why did you?"

"Honestly?"

She settles back. "Yes, I'm interested. And for the record, it was you who brought this up."

"It was wasn't it? I'm sorry about that. I guess it was because I felt my mother would have disapproved. I don't think Gramps would have been too impressed either."

"Gramps?"

"My great, great grandfather."

Her eyes open wide in surprise: "He's still around?"

"No, he died in 1910. In fact they're all gone now. Gramps is a kind of proxy for my past, my ancestry. I talk to him, even see him sometimes, out of the corner of my eye, or in my dreams. You're looking at me strangely and I don't blame you. He's my inner voice, my wise old man... I don't think of him as being literally real, you understand?"

"It's all right. No need to be shy about it. I do it too."

"You do? Well... I'd be careful who you tell. It's like the drawing. Admitting to something like that would be professional suicide... social suicide as well in the wrong company. But your secret's safe with me."

She smiles. "And yours with me." Then she says: "I talk to my sister. And you're right about the professional suicide. There are some things better kept among friends." A shadow passes over her. "No sense in being a martyr over these things, is there?"

"Exactly. Your sister, you said? She's... gone?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

"Long time ago. We were both in our teens. Twins in fact."

"You must miss her."

She offers a tight little smile. "Yes. But like your Gramps, I still see her around."

She's staring at me now, stroking her lips with her fingers. She's wondering about telling me something, sharing something, but thinks twice and snaps out of it with a smile: "Sorry. The fire's putting me to sleep. Cards, you said? It'll mean rooting about in the drawers to see if there are any. There must be some, somewhere. Strip poker perhaps? That should liven things up a bit – take our mind off the storm at least and all this morose introspection." She's joking of course, and she laughs, but it's forced. I don't believe this is where she wants us to go, back into the shallow waters of strangers. She wants to continue on a serious course, but she's wondering how much more directness I can bear.

"Strip poker would be a bit unfair, Adrienne. For one thing I'd have far more to gain from it than you."

She laughs. "Ah, such a gentleman. But are you flirting with me, Mr Simpson?"

"Sampson. Flirting? I suppose I am, a little. Not bad for a first attempt? I hope you don't mind. I didn't mean anything by it."

"Agreed. Not bad. And I know you didn't mean anything. Perhaps reading is more our speed then." She looks over to the coffee table. "I spy a copy of People's Friend, and a book of Wordsworth's poems."

"I'll take the People's Friend."

"Not if you're really a gentleman you won't."

She hands me the book, and as I receive it I look at her fingers. They're long, and lightly tanned on their upsides, fading to white

underneath. I see the gold band gleaming darkly there, not the pale gold of a modern ring, but something older, reddish, centuries old,... like my own.

"You drive very well," I tell her, though I'm not sure why, and she looks at me puzzled. "I mean, driving over with you, I felt safe. Sorry, I was just thinking about what you said – about not driving in the dark."

As a healer, by comparison with her own wise words, I clearly have a long way to go and would be better thinking of myself more simply as a rescuer of Donkeys, than souls.

"Safe?"

"Sorry, stupid thing to say."

"No... thank you. It's sweet of you. But you might have felt differently, had you been with me the night I crashed my car."

I'm thinking this is her way in now, and I'm expecting her to go on. Indeed she looks at me like she's wanting to tell me about it, but then she loses her nerve and leaves it hanging there. I'm still just a stranger, and she needs her space. It must have been one hell of a crash, the sort of thing that changes your life, the sort of thing that leaves shards of glass and metal deep under your skin.

We settle back for an hour while she flicks aimlessly at the People's Friend and my eyes slither about, failing to gain purchase on a single one of Wordsworth's verses. It's hard to concentrate anyway because I'm still mulling over the clues she's given me. A car crash. At night. A bad one. Was she alone? Husband? Kids?

The sky darkens further, enfolding us in a cloak of velvet twilight while the wind roars in the chimney and the first fat splodges of rain begin to slap against the windows.

Something comes over me then and *I know*. I know, because Amelia is sitting in the chair, opposite. She's leaning over and whispering it to me while she knits her sweater. Over the clickety clack of her busy needles she tells me Adrienne's husband was indeed in that car, and a child maybe... or more than one... and they're gone now. She lost them all that night. The book falls into my lap and I lift my eyes to the ceiling as this sinks in.

I realise Adrienne's watching me, curious, as if she's read my thoughts and found me guilty of reading hers. "Poems not your thing then?" she asks.

"Em... they're fine. I like poetry. You?"

"I have to be in the mood for poetry, especially Wordsworth. I

used to read a lot of poetry, write it too – don't look at me like that – I'm only an office dogsbody between the hours of nine and five. The rest of the time I'm an ordinary human being, same as any other."

"Adrienne, a poet is hardly an *ordinary* human being."

"I didn't say I was a poet. Only that I used to write poems *sometimes*."

"Is there a difference?"

She gives me a patient look. "One writes poems, the other doesn't. Not any more."

"Why did you stop?"

"It was pointless. Unknown scribblers like me are ten a penny. Haven't you noticed? All the famous ones went to Oxford and know lots of other Oxford-bred poets."

"That's not true. But surely... "

"What?"

I feel something slotting together here, it's familiar; a picture of a life-changing event, something that smashes you to pieces, leaves the pieces scattered and seemingly out of reach or hope of ever being stitched back together. *What happened to you, Adrienne?*

"I was just thinking, a poet... it's about mining your unconscious, isn't it? Seeing what comes up, and writing it down – whether anyone else reads it or not? It's like my drawings, you explore yourself through them. You don't always need an audience, do you? A poet is just someone who writes poems. The only difference between you and that Oxford crowd as you call it is... well... they're just,... celebrities."

She gives me a sharp look. "Your point?"

"My point is... is writing poetry something you can really just stop doing?"

She considers this for a moment and the look in her eye tells me I'm right. She feels it too. "Well, maybe in my case it's not such a good idea, exploring myself, mining the unconscious."

"I thought that was the whole point of art."

"Ordinarily."

"This is what you used to blog?"

She smiles. "Among other things. I used to lecture in Philosophy, also English Lit. But,... you know,... there were cutbacks. And Further Education's no longer all it's cracked up to be."

"Oh?"

"No longer about education, I mean. Now it's just money, like everything else. So we've got kids these days with degrees who can't string a simple sentence together, or link two separate pieces of knowledge into a single Eureka moment."

She's full of revelations!

"You were an academic?"

"Either that or a student who didn't know when to call it a day. Dr. Adrienne Divine, at your service, sir."

"And Dr. Philip Sampson, at yours."

"Bragging are we? I bet you still have that title on your business card."

"Definitely not. I don't overplay the Ph.D. at the office. They'd take a very dim view of it. I'd end up with my tyres let down and a stinky fish taped under my desk."

"Ah. Let me guess, you're embarrassingly overqualified for what you do?"

"Possibly, but then so are you."

"I know, I know. But so far as my office is concerned, all I've got are a couple of O Levels. Maths and English. Can spell. Can add up. Can earn minimum wage."

"Whereas redundant Ph.D.'s need contacts?"

"Very astute. Or at least contacts who'll still speak to them."

"Adrienne... whatever did you do to upset them that much?"

"I told you, it was cut-backs." But she's smiling, hinting at more.

A crack of lightning makes her jump, then there comes a rush as the rain sweeps in to hammer steadily at the windows. We listen to it for a while, listen to the mad roar of it. It's like something pent up, released of a sudden, and I relax into it.

"I knew there was something odd about you," I tell her.

"Odd?"

"No, I mean... unusual. You really aren't an estate agent at all."

"Why do we have to label everything? Estate Agent, Academic, Geologist. What I am is just a person carrying on. Isn't that what you're doing?"

"Me?"

"You might have been killed that day. You were spared, but five men died. Now you're scared to fly, to go out to sea, so you got yourself a desk job, and you've stuck at it as best you can. You've carried on."

Wait,... she's doing it again. I've just caught a tantalising glimpse

of something fascinating in her past, and she's already busy covering it over with my own wreckage, turning it back onto me.

"Carried on? Hardly. And after ten years of struggling with it, I intend quitting, I intend hiding myself away from everything, growing a shaggy beard and shaking my fist at the world. My unconscious is like a volcano, Adrienne. I still see those guys every day. They all had families, you know? Wives, children who needed them. Why take them and spare me?... What use am I? No children, no woman. Who the hell needs me? What crazy law of fate decided I was worth hanging onto?"

She's smiling. It disarms me. "I'm trying to imagine you with a shaggy beard," she says. "You really wouldn't suit it."

"Well... who'd notice, who'd care?"

"Same people who never read my poems. Same people who never look at your drawings. And I suppose what I mean is... you're right. Who'd care? That's pretty much the way it is. No one cares. But is that sufficient reason for us to stop caring about ourselves? To stop believing in our own importance? Because we *are* important, Phil. You and I. We both *matter*."

I'm not sure what she means by this, but I feel momentarily uplifted by it. "Did nobody read your blog? For sure I would have read it had I known it was there."

"Why?"

"For answers. Isn't that what people do who read blogs? They search for stuff they're interested in and see how it chimes with their own thoughts – and not the sanitised, trite, glossy pre-packaged info-bytes you get in the proper media. Blogs are raw, un-sanitised, anarchic."

"Or in other words mostly self-conscious crap. And there are as many blogs out there as there are Flickr accounts, and everyone jumping up and down shouting look at me, look at me."

"Forgive me, Adrienne, but it sounds like there's more to it. The reason you stopped writing, I mean."

"The reason I stopped? Well let's say you're right about blogs, and people are searching for something. But the irony of it is, if you were to tell them what they wanted to hear, lay it out in black and white, they wouldn't believe you anyway."

"I'm not sure... I think I'd believe it, if I saw it."

"No you wouldn't, because we all have fixed ideas about what we think that thing is. We're living in such a material world, Phil,

which at this juncture in our history means basically nobody cares for anything other than their own self aggrandisement. And things aren't getting any better. There's just this big scrum of alpha-beings fighting over the last crumbs of material stuff. And when those crumbs are gone, when they've pumped the last drop of oil and dug up the last flake of copper, what then?"

Copper? Did she just say copper?

"I don't know,... what then?"

"I don't know either, and I don't care, to be frank, but it's looking pretty grim if you insist on viewing the world as a purely material place. I want to escape it, but when all there is is shit at every turn, you realise you have to become more mystical in your thinking if you want to make proper sense of it. And then you realise you can live anywhere, even down among the shit. Because you become immune to it."

She's struck a chord with this one. She's talking about transcendence. It's what I'm seeking. How can this be? Surely, I *must* be imagining her. "I know."

"I know you know. At least I do now. But when we met this afternoon, I was thinking there wasn't a mystical bone in your body, that they'd been crushed out of you, like every other poor bastard who wanders the planet wearing a suit these days, searching for meaning in designer labels? I mean- even the *men*."

"Is that why you were so difficult to talk to, earlier?"

She laughs. "I'm sorry. I was a bit chilly, wasn't I? Not your fault. I was mainly cross with Angela for dumping you on me."

"I guessed."

"Listen... you want to be the mystic, Phil? Then be the mystic. Don't think there's something strange about you for talking to Gramps, or you should be ashamed of it, or you're becoming unhinged. You're not. But it's not something you can do as a hobby either. Look at you?"

"What about me?"

"Plain grey suit, sober tie, shiny shoes, and if I recall correctly, the latest Android smartphone in your pocket."

"All right, that's a fair assessment, but you don't exactly look like a witch either."

"Fair point, but I told you, I'm not out of the closet yet."

"Well neither am I."

She backs down with a smile, but for a moment there she was

almost aggressive in driving home her point, which was what? That we should each be true to our inner natures? We all know that's the right way to be, but how many of us actually live up to the ideal?

"Touché," she says. "But tell me, do you ever let him out? I mean the mystic?"

"At home, in private."

"Reading weird stuff, doing meditation, that sort of thing?"

I'm nodding to all of this, feeling myself tingling, like she's undressing me.

"Good," she says. "It's good you let him out. But he'll want out more often, and you have no choice but to let him ,now. And he *will* destroy you. Destroy your old life, or transform it, depending on how you see things. And you must let him, because he'll kill you if you don't."

"I know."

Do I? Do I really know? Of course I do. He's killing me now.

"Maybe that's why you're here, Phil, wondering if you can let him out completely and live to tell the tale. In fact, maybe you're done with living among those rational, materialist bastards on the mainland, maybe Leven Isle is exactly the sort of place you need. So, why not make a start. Take off your tie. Open your shirt a little."

She gives me that challenging look, the upward tilt of her nose, the eyes that dare you to agree with her. So I take off my tie, and tug open the shirt a few buttons.

"Better," she says. "I think I see him, now. So... the mystic and the witch."

"I thought you couldn't see anything at night without your contacts."

"Pig." She looks at me, looks into me, through me. "I see what's important. And what I can't see, I'm more comfortable ignoring these days."

I'm not sure where to take us from here. She's right, I'm tired of the pretence of living my life in two dimensions like everyone else. And she's right about the mystical life. Once you give rein to it, you can't stop it. And when you're faced with nothing but shit at every turn, the only place left to go is inside your head. But for now I want to turn it all back on her, see how often she lets out the witch, find out why she got sacked from the University.

"Adrienne,..."

But it's not to be. Suddenly, she winces as if she's been kicked

and she presses her hand to her abdomen. "Ohhhh!"

Even I felt that. "Menstrual cramps?"

She looks at me. "How did you know?"

"I may not have been married, but I have *lived* with women." I fumble in my pockets. "Paracetamol any good?"

"No... useless. I'm sorry, Phil. You'll have to excuse me for a moment."

"Sure. Shall I see if there's a hot water-bottle?"

She gives another grimace as the cramps bite deep. "Thanks. That might help." And then, with a wry smile: "They had you well trained... those women of yours."

"Yes, I was a good fetcher of hot water bottles, but I never admitted talking to ghosts."

"More's the pity, or one of them might have learned to trust you enough to marry you."

"Or had me certified."

I find a hot water bottle in the kitchen, in a cupboard under the sink, and while Adrienne visits the bathroom, I boil a kettle, after filling it with difficulty because my hands are shaking. Yes, there's a vulnerability to her, like a wounded animal, and she needs approaching with care, if one's to avoid a mauling. But she has answers, as well as a habit of firing the right questions at me. Yes, there really is something truly divine about Ms Divine.

We've both been torn from safe moorings, and now the rag-ends of us are beginning to fit together in a way I can't get at yet. But something's telling me although we might be feeling useless apart, together we could take on the world, reflect back its ugliness, and truly find peace. If I didn't know any better I'd say something was guiding this – fate perhaps – and it's telling me she has something I want, something I can only guess at, but something real and vital. And she needs me too, needs what I have – if only I can work out what it is in time, before we part company tomorrow.

Chapter 13

Birdy

She's lying on the couch, shoes kicked off, legs tucked under, a pillow from the bedroom to support her head. I've wrapped the bottle in a tea-towel so she won't be scalded. She receives it gratefully, presses it cautiously to her abdomen, then gives a moan of relief as the heat eases the cramps. And as she relaxes, I feel a shudder running through me, something more deeply sexual even than sex, and I realise I will do anything for her, if she will only look kindly upon me and talk to me some more.

"You get them bad?"

She nods. "But the menopause should take care of that. Can't wait. Shouldn't be long now."

"You're a fraud, Ms. Divine. I see through you."

"I doubt that Mr Simpson."

"You're sensitive, but you choose not to show it."

"Rubbish. Where are you going, now?"

"To see if I can find you a blanket."

"What? No, come back. I'll be too hot. And it'll make me sleepy, and I don't want to sleep. Just sit down will you? You're making me nervous, hopping about all the time."

"I'll go into the conservatory... give you some space."

"It's my period, Phil, that's all. I'm not dying."

"Okay,... okay. I'll sit."

I draw the footstool up to the chair, toss a few logs on the fire, then lay back. It makes me feel easy, seeing her easy beside me, and of course I don't want to spend the night alone, not when there's such singularly interesting company to be had. But as the room grows warmer I feel myself becoming drowsy, the unconscious world seducing me away from her. I resist it. I want to talk to her, because there's so little time, and so much to say.

I pull off my shoes and set them aside, then realise I have a big hole in my sock, the toes showing through. I'm embarrassed by it and cross my legs to hide the offending foot, but she's already seen it and she's chuckling.

"Too late, Mr. Simpson."

She's doing this on purpose! "My name. Is *Sampson*," I tell her. And then, for emphasis: "Philip. *A*. Sampson."

"Well, Mr. Philip. A. Sampson, did your mother never tell you to always wear clean socks and underpants, in case you had an accident?"

"They're clean,... just not in the best repair."

She chuckles again. "And the A?"

"The A? What A?"

"The A in your name, of course, Mr. Philip A. *Sampson*."

"Oh... Arthur."

"Arthur Sampson? Now that's much better. No wonder I can never remember your last name – it simply doesn't go with Philip. Do you mind if I call you Arthur, Arthur?"

I smile at that. "My Aunt Flo always called me Arthur. Refused to call me anything else."

"Then she was wise, sensitive to the hidden energies of the labels we attached to ourselves. And names have to fit, you know? Or they don't work. They don't stick."

"Well, Philip's stuck with me for long enough. Not that I mind you calling me, Arthur."

"And how long, exactly, have you been around Arthur?"

"Are you fishing for my age, Ms. Divine?"

"Obviously."

"Well, I'm forty. Is that even older than you thought?"

"No. A little younger, actually. Sensitive about our age, are we?"

"Yes, but only because I lied. I'm forty five."

"Seriously? Forty five, and never married? You really are on the shelf, aren't you? Or perhaps you're like this house – something deeply unsettling about you that puts prospective buyers off."

"I was wondering how we were going to pass the time, Ms Divine,... but actually we seem to be having no trouble at all."

"It's turning out to be fun, yes."

"I never knew flirting could be so easy."

"Are we flirting, Arthur? I'd say this was more like banter."

"Banter is for men. Between a man and a woman, trust me, it's *always* flirting."

She considers this for a moment, then gives an approving nod. "Then I suppose we are flirting." She gasps as the cramps take her again. "Oh,... fuck!... Sorry!"

"We should rest. Are you going to be all right? Is this normal for you?"

"Yes... normal. You should see me on a bad day."

"Then let's rest a bit. Let me know when you need that bottle heating up."

"All right. Thank you, Arthur."

"You know, I'm not sure I like Arthur. It does makes me sound rather old, but I'm sure you'll call me whatever you like. You've been doing it all afternoon."

She gives another chuckle, then lays back comfortably, settles her head into the pillow and closes her eyes. Again, I feel as rush of something, a tingling in my bones at this display of trust, that she can rest so easily in my company. We let the heat wash over us, and as the silence grows I find myself reluctant to break it for fear of disturbing her rest. At last then my inane chatter is arrested, and I let my thoughts take me back inside myself. Then, as the evening comes on, and in spite of the storm crashing louder, I succumb to a gradual bone-numbing weariness, and fall asleep

All right. I need to prepare the ground a little here because we don't teach dreaming any more, and I know so many of us have lost the knack of it. Indeed, there are many of you out there right now reading this and thinking you don't dream at all. But trust me, you do. You dream every night – it's just that you forget. So take a little time to remember each morning on waking, and rest assured you'll rediscover for yourselves a rich world of surreal symbol and allegory.

Since the accident though, I've discovered there are dreams and then there are *dreams*. Out at sea, those three days, one of the ways I dealt with the fear of drowning was to close my eyes and will myself into a fantasy world. It sounds unlikely, I know, but when the body's physically done in and close to collapse, the mind will latch on to any escape it can – even a self-induced delirium. I started with simple things, like the fire-lit parlour of my mother's house, finally to recovering all the details of a walk I used to do in the Coniston fells.

I would experience everything in stunning detail – total recall – the glitter of the sunlight on wayside streams, the tinkle of the waterfalls, even the scent of the grasses. Nothing is lost, you see? Every experience, every observation we have in life is like those dreams we lose on waking. We have no inkling of having kept these things, nor even that we have the capacity to do so... but keep them we do – and to trigger them is to not only to recall, but to relive that experience. The brain isn't big enough, you're thinking. But

then you're assuming the mind is the brain.

Once I discovered this faculty, you can hardly blame me for retreating into it and for trying by force of will, and not a little madness, to free my soul, to squeeze it through the eye of consciousness into the world of dreams, and there to hide in pleasantly fantastic surroundings, or if nothing else then hopefully to drown with myself already safe on the other side of eternity, some other safe and fondly recalled part of my life, so perhaps I would not even notice the awful moment of my own death.

I had always drawn short of believing in the "other side" – be it of the religious or secular variety with it's talk of the fabled Summerlands. And of course therein lies the root of so many a middle aged neurosis, because you can't address the true nature of something so fundamental as the ending of your own existence by simply ignoring it. Nor can you really get to grips with the meaning of your own life without a proper unflinching contemplation of your own death.

My own suspicion, after the accident, was that your life began again, once that total recall kicked in. I was forced to play around with various ideas of reincarnation – that we lived it all over again, but that seemed pointless, unless we could make changes as we went along, that we could subliminally alter our course, and create new memories, that somewhere, stored in the infinite annals of the universal mind was the perfect life, the life we were each of us striving for, yet never conscious of achieving.

I know... I started off talking about dreams, and now I'm talking about recall. Well, there is a link, but you're right and dreams are different. The way I see it total recall is the same literal interpretation of your life, as life itself, while there's nothing literal about a dream. Dreams really are something else entirely, something closer to the Summerlands of fable. But the contemplation of these things, driven home by sheer necessity changed something in me, broke something, overwrote a line of code in my underlying program, so in the months that followed the accident, I found myself waking in my dreams.

The first time this happens to you you'll most likely be so scared you'll wake yourself back to reality. But then you get used it, realise you're in control and can alter any part of what you see. As for your senses, everything's there – you can feel textures, smell odours, and you can cause a cool breeze to stroke your face. Once dismissed as

mystical nonsense, they're scientifically recognised these days, and known as lucid dreams. To the unimaginative scientist, with an eye for his career path, they're still of little account – just another of nature's curiosities, and probably useless. But to the dreamer and the mystic? This inner space is a perfectly valid reality, and entirely independent of what we think of as the real world.

The lucid dreamer must once again ask the question: where is this space? Is it inside my head? Is it nothing more than the biochemical gurglings of my brain? Only a half baked adult, or a materialist would seek to posit such a childish theory. The alternative, however, is stranger still - and adds weight to the argument that rather than creating consciousness, the brain is merely the apparatus we use for tuning into a small, manageable part of the greater part of us. So, we are more than we seem, and mostly we live elsewhere, other than in our heads. So, now I'm of a mind that we we only die to those around us, to those we leave behind in the literal contemplation of a material reality.

Magical thinking again, and half baked, mystical nonsense to anyone who's not had the experiences to make them ask these questions. But even if you have had them, it's still short of the absolute knowing Adrienne spoke of, and that intrigues me. What more does she know?

But anyway,... where were we?

Ah,... yes. Dreaming.

Lucid Dreaming.

It doesn't happen to me every night, but it happens that night – maybe triggered by the strangeness of everything. I wake up in that dream to find myself behind the wheel of a camper van – an old split screen VW. I'm delighted by this because I recognise it as the one my father owned in the seventies – the same rattling throb of the engine, the same musty smell of the interior. We toured Cornwall in it, but now I'm steering it along the causeway, out towards Leven Isle.

Fair enough,... no surprises there. I settle in, literally take control of the camper van right down to the feel of its vibrations through the palms of my hands on the wheel. I test it with a little side to side motion, feel it sway, see the bright sparkles of the spray sent up from the puddles.

Then I realise there's a woman beside me – young, red hair, a yellow sun-frock and a straw hat. As the van rocks, the light is

glinting off the silver pendants at her bosom. There's a dense cluster of them – a pentagram and the tree of life, like Adrienne - but this is not Adrienne. There's also a ban the bomb trinket, nestled in there, and what looks like a naked woman making love to a crescent moon. She's younger than Adrienne, still in her twenties with freckles, and a big white toothed smile. It's not the girl from the lap-dancing club either. I've no idea who she is, but again this is not unusual in dreams, lucid or otherwise and I'm happy just to go along. She looks at me, and I feel a shock of warmth, of love... and recognition. I do know her from somewhere, some recent experience, but I can't remember who she is!

I try a greeting. "Hello."

She smiles back, perfectly at ease in my company... but says nothing.

I'm still not sure about the nature of others we encounter in dreams. Common sense tells me they're all projections of something in ourselves, but I wouldn't like to say for sure and am prepared to accept that some visitors to our dreamscapes have an autonomous, daemon like quality about them. It's just hard to tell the difference, and I've found the best thing is just to go along with things, respect their presence – and treat them all as potential keyholders to a deeper knowledge of yourself.

This girl has an erotic feel about her, and I'm wondering about that, wondering if she's nothing more than my own wishful thinking. Yet she comes ready formed with such a lot of persistent detail – her clothes, her beads... the weave and the slightly threadbare look of her hat.

Anyway, we come up from the causeway and I'm steering the VW towards Beach Cottage, but she leans over, puts her hand on mine and steers us up the castle road instead. I feel the heat of her, and an intense presence that takes my breath away. Then I see a string of beads nestled in with the rest – cuboid, silver, each one bearing a letter, spelling out a name: B.I.R.D.Y.

There's a meadow, below the castle, neatly fenced, the grass mown short. Here I swing the van around and park, so we have a view of the sea. The tide's already in, which is impossible, but it adds to the beauty of the scene. Birdy's wound her window down, so I can taste the air and hear the mewl of gulls. With a little effort I cause a breeze to move her hair and stroke my cheek. I'm lost to it for while, puzzled by her, but then I think of Adrienne, on the sofa,

somewhere in a denser form of reality, and Birdy gives me a knowing look, winks and invites me with a little motion of her head, to lay myself down in her lap. So I do that. The feel of her is exquisite, and so intense I know it's going to wake me, but not before she's run her fingers through my hair, and sighed a sigh of bliss that melts my heart.

There's a kite on the table in the back of the camper, big and bright with great coils of ribbon for a tail. And then it comes to me by way of various associations; I know exactly who she is. If she's not Adrienne, then she's Adrienne's sister.

She pats my shoulder then and, still without speaking, opens the door, eases herself out, away from me, but gestures with her eyes for me to follow. She's standing in the meadow, wait deep in wild grasses, looking out at Refuge Crag – its profile like a chalk stack, shining China-white in the sun. She raises an eyebrow. Questioning? Something about Refuge Crag?

"I'm sorry, Birdy. I don't understand."

The mood changes then, takes on an even more intense erotic charge, so sudden and unbidden, I can only conclude it comes from her, this unreal person, this figment of my mind. I make to back away from this, but then she does something that confirms her autonomy to me in no uncertain terms. She steps up and takes a hold of my sex, so I swell into her fist, and then she kisses me, and as her tongue enters my mouth, I feel an orgasmic explosion, and I shudder wide awake.

It's dark. And I mean *dark*. It's like I've gone blind. My first thought is that I've had a wet-dream, except I'm forty five and I've been impotent for years. I slide a speculative hand below my waistband to check but there's only sweat for moisture down there, and not even the hint of an erection – just a curled up sleepy snail that's good for nothing these day except urinating and attracting fungal infections. I don't know whether to be relieved or disappointed.

I decide on both.

Chapter 14

Crash

The fire's gone out and there's a parched taste in my mouth. I'm thirsty, and growing hungry. Meanwhile, the rain's still hammering, the wind howling, the sash windows bumping out their morse-code. Yet over all of this ferociousness, I can hear the steady rhythm of someone sleeping – Adrienne. Her presence, I fancy, is holding the storm in check, calming it to a point just the sunny side of Armageddon.

How could I have slept so deeply through all of that?

She's awake now, "Arthur? I can't see you."

"It's all right. I'm here. I can't see you either."

"I mean I can't see *anything*."

"I know."

"Have you a torch, or a match?"

"The matches are down by the fireplace somewhere."

"Can you find them? I really need to move. I'm sorry."

I'm fully awake now. She needs the bathroom again. The light switch is by the door. I'll have to negotiate an obstacle-course of only vaguely remembered furnishings to get to it. The matches are a better bet.

"Okay... hang on."

It takes me ages, groping cautiously on hands and knees, literally trying to see with my fingertips, but finally I discover the matches and strike one. The room is momentarily lit with amber. She laughs good naturedly. "You've got a big hole in the heel of your stocking as well."

"You keep telling me you can't see in the dark without your contacts."

"Arthur, a blind man on a galloping horse could see that hole. You really know how to impress a girl."

I could have told her she looked like she'd been dragged through a hedge, her hair all messed up and her blouse hanging out of her skirt... and... that look in her eye. What is that? My God, she's beautiful! And suddenly the house is aching again, such an outpouring of love and longing. Or is that just something left over from the dream? I feel the need in her like an open wound, the life's blood of her energy and self worth pouring from it, and I want to

hold her, to stem the flow, to wrap her in tenderness until she heals.

She's puzzled by what she reads. "What is it?"

"Ouch!" The match has burned down, singed my fingers, so I let it fall to the fireplace. By the time I've lit the next one, I'm more in control of my face, and manage to get to the light switch without looking at her, but there's nothing like being pointedly ignored for rousing a woman's suspicions.

"Are you all right?" she asks. "I'm sorry if I teased you about your socks... I... I was just having a bit of fun..."

"I'm fine really. I do need to get some more socks. I'll make it my first job, when I get off the island."

I can't believe we're talking about my socks.

"Arthur really... I..."

She's beside me now, anxious she might actually have hurt my feelings over the comment about my stupid socks. For a moment I think she's going to touch my arm, but she reads my startled look as alarm perhaps, and holds herself apart. She's looking... waiting. I've not noticed the smell of her before – something sweet and warm. It's not perfume or soap. That would have worn off hours ago. It's her skin, and it's like honey or chocolate – scents I would have associated more with a dusky skin, rather than such an Anglo Saxon paleness. Surely she should smell of more like Rosemary perhaps, or Sage. Whatever it is, it's soft, gentle, intriguing, and I trust it. She reads something in me and blushes. And her blushing makes me blush too. I fumble awkwardly for the bottle she's still holding to her tummy.

"Shall I heat that up for you?"

She nods. The moment passes, and she makes her way upstairs.

Two a.m. now. I wait for her to come down, but she takes a while. I don't like the electric light. It's too bare, too utilitarian, and at that hour it's hurting my eyes. There are some candles, but they carry romantic connotations and I'm afraid of them. The best thing is to get the fire going again. While I gather sticks and logs and paper from the basket on the hearth, I'm thinking about the dream, of that drive over the causeway in the camper van. It brings back a flood of memories, of touring Cornwall with my father, and I'm remembering the warmth of security in an unspoken love, a security we're never really assured of once our parents have gone. And I'm thinking of the woman, of the bliss that poured out of her and into me.

Rescue Crag. And that kiss...

No use trying to get at this now, Phil.

Once the fire is crackling, I settle back in the chair and breathe. In the complex odours of burning wood, I fancy I smell Long-Cut again. Gramps? Yes... imagination reveals he's on the sofa now, a teacup balanced on his knee, like he's come to pay his respects to Amelia, who's sitting in her chair, knitting. Sounds crazy to you? I've not always been like this – not seeing things so vividly through that third eye, the inner eye that shines a very different light on experience. Like with the dreams, it only started after the accident. Two days afloat, not knowing which way was up, soaked in a mixture of brine, urine and vomit. In my head, I've been at my mother's fireside, I've been walking the fells over Coniston, and then I'm looking up to see Gramps sucking on that pipe, smiling at me. I think we all have the capacity to be like this – it's just a question of giving ourselves permission.

"Well lad?"

I'm remembering him propped up with comical ease in the confines of that stinking rubber boat, smiling reassurance, like he's doing now. "They're coming," he'd said.

In the morning, the dawn broke over a calmer sea. Then they came, the gaunt grey hull of a coast-guard cutter rearing up, whale-like as I lay prone and only half sensible in the bottom of the boat, clinging as if with premature rigor-mortis to the harnesses. Then the ropes came down and I heard the whine of an outboard motor.

"Well Gramps?"

He puts a finger to his lips now and shushes me, then points to Amelia. He's telling me she'll drop a stitch, and then we'll all be in trouble. I see the knitting coming from her needles. It's longer than when I first imagined it, and infinitely more intricate in its patterning, like an Arran sweater my mother once made for me. But these patterns resemble fractals... Amelia is knitting the fabric of reality. Meanwhile Gramps takes his watch from his waistcoat pocket, flips the lid and, as the reflection from its gold case flashes before me, he injects time and meaning into the void.

Yes, I'm thinking, it's always been this way – it's just that I've forgotten. And it's so obvious really, the underlying nature of things, and our purpose within it. I smile at its profound simplicity, then forget it all again the moment I blink away.

Adrienne returns all tucked in. Her hair is straight and shiny,

and her skin smells of something else, something fresh and sharp and defensive – a bottle-sprayed concoction she's plucked from her handbag. It's like something to repel bugs, or worse – to prevent her pheromones from giving her true feelings away. She smiles cosily, takes up the hot water bottle and lays it gratefully on her tummy. "Thank you," she says."You're such a sweet man, Phil."

Is she having me on?

"Sweet is it? Women have said that to me before. They say: you're such a sweet man Phil,... and then they say *but*."

She laughs. "There's no but. I mean it. You're a very sweet man. And interesting."

"Interesting? You mean mad don't you?"

She sighs theatrically. "Sir.... can't you just accept the lady's gift of a compliment, and leave it at that?"

I like the way she plays with me, sometimes spiky, sometimes tender. She's drifting into tenderness now, lowering my head into her lap, her fingers stroking my brow – not literally of course. I'm just thinking of the dream again, and it releases a presence, someone settling at my elbow – the woman from the dream, Adrienne's sister. I recognise her scent, a hint of lemon and something spicy– ginger I think. And what's that she's whispering? She's telling me to take a chance on opening Adrienne up a little, so I follow my intuition, and I chance it:

"How did it happen?"

"How did what happen?"

"I've shown you my scars, now you show me yours."

"You mean the crash?"

She licks her lips because they've grown dry suddenly and for a while she doesn't say anything, so I'm thinking she's closed herself back up, but then she starts to tell me, tells it like the confession to something that has long preyed on her mind. And it's more than I'm prepared for.

"We were arguing. Me and Chuck. It was dark and I was driving because he'd been drinking. I didn't have my contacts in, as usual, and he knew that. But he'd already got nine points on his licence and didn't want any more. It was a stupid thing to do, but when you live with someone you get caught up in their madness, don't you?

"What can I say about Chuck? He liked to be in control, liked people to do as they were told – a very masculine kind of man, which is what attracted me to him I suppose. I was young, and I felt

I needed a man for protection, you know? And Chuck would protect me, I thought – and he was as good as his word, but he did it by taking away my independence, by trying to turn me into a submissive woman.

“If you didn't do things his way he'd sulk for days... fill the house with a terrible, simmering, foul smelling resentment, and I hated it. So mostly I just did as I was told. That's why even though I was as good as blind that night, I drove. Like I said, marriage is a kind of mutual madness.

"And there was something else, already a resentment coming out of him from something we'd argued about off and on for months. He wanted to go to America... that's where he's from – Baltimore. He wanted to take the children, set up a new life – all of us – escape this miserable recession, you see? We were struggling, financially. His business had tanked, we had debts, and my salary wasn't in the right league to help us out much. We had to sell the house, move down to something I could afford the rent on. And he didn't like that – the moving down and the fact he was suddenly relying on me for money.

"But I didn't want to go to America. I told him things were no better there –maybe even worse. Except, I knew what he was thinking. His family would help us out. They're wealthy, well connected. They'd simply set us up somewhere. Pay for everything. And maybe I should have been grateful for that, especially for my children – them not having to worry or want for anything, ever.

"But his family are also little overwhelming, like him, only ten times worse, and I would have lost myself completely there. In fact, given my spiritual leanings, I'd probably have found myself burned at the stake. Does any of this sound selfish to you? They never really took me seriously. You know? A lecturer in Psychology and Philosophy - I mean, what the hell is that? Why didn't I major in something useful, like Economics or Political Science?

"But I didn't want to be a passenger, Phil. You can see that can't you? And there's something noble in the struggle, don't you think? Meeting the world on your own terms? Otherwise, why bother making any effort at all if you can simply rely on someone else to fill your pockets every time you falter?

"Anyway, the accident: I hit the bend all wrong, didn't even see it coming to be honest, and I was going too fast. I remember the car skidding, then rolling... I don't remember anything else – not about

the accident anyway. I'm told they had to cut me out of the wreck. And then there was a problem with my brain, they said. And my heart stopped. I actually died, briefly, in the hospital. And... well... it was a couple of weeks before I woke up, and found out they were gone."

"Gone?"

"Chuck and the kids."

She's calm as she's telling me all of this, but there's also something restrained about it, like she's braced and boarded up. I suppose it's the only way you can tell a story like that.

"Adrienne, I'm so sorry."

She's reading a little more horror in my expression than she's expecting, but then she's also reading my mistaken assumption her husband and children died in the crash – an assumption based on a premonition I had not long ago, before we both slept.

But...

"No, Phil, bless you. When I said they were gone, I didn't mean they were *gone*. I mean, he'd gone to America, taken the children with him. And there was my mother, with a face like a cat's arse, telling me it was all my fault, and why hadn't I just gone to America in the first place, like Chuck wanted?"

I cast an accusing eye at Amelia's chair, but the old dear shrugs back at me without so much as looking up from her knitting. Then Birdy puts her arm around my shoulder and leans close. She's got her forehead up against the side of my face. I can feel her, and in a wordless way, she's telling me Amelia was right. It was me who'd misinterpreted the insight, as is so often the way with premonitions. There was a crash. Adrienne was seriously injured, and she lost her family because of it.

"Chuck wasn't hurt?"

"Bumps and bruises. He managed to wriggle out of the wreck himself. Always was lucky that way. They had to take the roof off to get at me." She shudders. "I'm glad I don't remember any of that. I broke my arm, my leg, and then there was the small matter of dying briefly at the hospital, and the coma that followed. I'm not too bad now. I still get the occasional blinding headache and I just have to lie down. I'm also hopeless with names, but then you already know that."

I'm nodding, taking all of this in, running it through my head before realising I've glossed over the most significant thing in all of

this – at least for Adrienne: "You're saying while you were lying in hospital, in a coma, Chuck used the opportunity to snatch your children, then flew back to the fortress of his family in the States?"

"That's not a bad summary. Not a bad metaphor either – fortress. I like that. Very... apt."

"Do you ever see them?"

"Only on Skype – for as long as I can bear it. But I usually end up weeping or something. I can be a bit of a cry-baby, Arthur. I'm sorry."

"You've never been out there?"

She gives a little shake of the head, then hugs herself. "I'm not joking when I tell you I haven't the money for the flights."

"But... isn't Chuck thinking to get you over there too? Surely he'd pay for you to go, then try persuading you to stay once you're out there, maybe by showing you how much better things are."

"No, Chuck was never that subtle. He wants a divorce... says I'm emotionally abusive – which I admit I was, with him, towards the end, but only because a frying pan or a rolling pin aren't my style. But he claims I'm like that with the children too, and that really hurts. He says I won't get anywhere near them. Says I'm unfit. And his family are well connected, the kind who have lawyers and doctors on speed-dial, and if they say you're schizophrenic, manic-depressive, bi-polar, then that's what you are because they'll have papers to prove it in court, and there's no point arguing otherwise, even though I'm a psychologist myself and presumably know otherwise.

"I'm like you, Phil - a dose of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, a smattering of related and occasionally debilitating neuroses, but nothing time won't fix – I mean it's not like we've done an extended tour of duty in Afghanistan or anything, is it? But I'm also poor, and faint-hearted. And my mother's right; I just mess everything up."

"Oh... Adrienne... *Adrienne,...*"

"Well, you did ask."

"How many children?"

"Two girls."

"Are they like you?"

"What? I hope not... No... Wait,... I don't mean that. Sandy is... she's nine. Melissa's more like Chuck. She's a bit older... I think she blames me. If only I'd held onto the car going through that bend we might all still be together. But I don't know.. I don't know what

happened."

"They were in the car too?"

"No, thank God." She gestures with her eyes at Amelia's mementos. "That might have been us," she says. "Family. A generation of memories, and continuity with generations passed. It's all I ever wanted from my life – that and to be the kind of mother for my children my own mother seemed incapable of being for me. But now it's... ruined."

"It sounds like Chuck was going to the States whether you crashed that car or not."

She nods. "I know. But we're here for such a short time, Phil... in life, I mean, and the only really useful thing we can do is take care of our children, set them on their path. Anything else... poetry, art,... it's all bullshit, even if it makes you famous. So you see, my poetry... my stupid poetry... and that stupid self-obsessed blog..."

Her face buckles. Suddenly there she is, her chin quivering, her eyes blinded with quicksilver.

"I'm sorry," I tell her.

I sound pathetic. I *am* pathetic. I can't make love to this woman, I can't even comfort her. I'm physically and emotionally useless to women. All I can do is set them up on a pedestal, plant a garland of laurel leaves upon their heads and kneel down in worship of something in my own pathetic self. But this is a human being, Phil. She needs something from you. She needs to know you're there, that you're not just a figment of her imagination. How do you do that!

She's shaking her head, waving her hands in a kind of inarticulate semaphore, and in it I read the whole tangled disaster. At last, I venture to sit on the couch beside her, palms open though still not knowing what to do or say, but at least I'm a little nearer, and meaning well. She doubles over and lays her face in her hands. I lay my hand upon her back – gently at first, afraid she'll leap away, but she doesn't flinch and I just let it lay there.

I *do* feel for her.

"You've not talked about this much, have you?"

She shakes her head.

"How long ago?"

She takes a ragged breath then sits up, but I keep my hand where it is. "Two years." Then she stands and crosses to the French window. Beyond it lies only the squalling rain and the darkness,

rendering the glass a black mirror, and in it the reflection of her tear stained face staring back at me. "Sorry for being such a cry-baby," she says.

"What will you do?"

She blinks away the last of the tears, wipes them carelessly on her sleeves. "Oh... I'll raise some money, and go over there for a while, make sure they don't forget me. But five pounds an hour isn't exactly helping to make my fortune. It barely covers the rent."

"That's what you're earning? But that's slave labour. It's way below the minimum wage."

"There's no such thing as minimum wage in this climate, Phil. Minimum these days is whatever the bastards can get away with – and who's going to challenge them? That mythical trades union for the economically dispossessed? Still, I can't complain. There's always an upside. It's helped me lose weight since I cut out the alcohol. And boy did I used to drink!"

"What about when you qualify?"

"As an estate agent you mean? Don't be silly. You don't *qualify* as an estate agent, you just set up shop and bluff your way through. There's no training plan for me. I just do whatever jobs the others don't want to do. I'll grin and bear things until I can't take it any more, then walk out like the last girl did, or get sacked because my face doesn't fit any more. It was Crabby Carstairs who was supposed to be bringing you out here this afternoon, but she had bigger fish than you to fry, out lunching our property developer – yes he does exist – maybe even dropping her knickers for him as well, if I know her. She's so desperate to get this place off her books, I'm sure she'll try anything – sorry, that was unbecoming. She's very good at what she does, just not very good at managing people."

"Well, if it's any comfort – which I'm sure it's not – I can't think of anyone I'd rather be stuck here with."

She cracks an unexpected grin. "Actually, it *is* a comfort, Phil. Thank you."

Does she mean this? I suppose she does. I don't know what to say, so I change the subject. "Your children, Adrienne, they're hardly likely to forget you. And they grow so quickly. Soon they'll be able to come and visit you on their own."

"Yes, another few years and Melissa will be starting University. I tell myself by the time I'm forty, they could both be back here in England with me, from their own choice. But that's a long time for a

child and they won't need me then. And I miss not being with them, not having them around me, not being needed by them. I even miss not being able to shout at them any more for making so much washing."

She's still bleeding – a mother separated from her children by an overbearing egotistical oaf – at least that's how I like to simplify my image of Chuck – draw out his weaknesses, make a vulgar caricature of them. But I'm still missing something here.

"Adrienne?"

"Hmm?"

"It's none of my business, but can't you broaden your horizons to include, if not your degree, then maybe a couple of A levels and get yourself a better job, one that pays more?"

"Haven't you been following the downturn, Phil? It's truly impossible out there at the moment. The money may be crap but at least I get to sit in an office and wear nice clothes. The last place I was washing dishes in a restaurant until the small hours of the morning – I lasted six months. I cast a spell to make the pain of it stop, and guess what? The restaurant closed down."

"And I suppose a return to academia?..."

She's already shaking her head. "Like you said, it's about contacts, but it's also about your reputation among your peers." She laughs. "And I set fire to mine a long time ago."

"Was it the Neopagan thing?"

"That's an intelligent guess, but no... it was much worse than that. People can always dismiss Neopaganism as just another dumb religion, and they can forgive you for it. I know Evolutionary Biologists who still call themselves Christian, and attend church every Sunday.

"No, what I did was set myself against the prevailing paradigm, because that's what I thought I was supposed to do. But I misjudged things. I wasn't quite myself after the accident. I said some things... in lectures, which made them think I'd lost it completely. Next thing I know... here I am."

This is a little vague, a little cryptic. I decide not to press her on it, but she seems to have opened up now, so I change tack, thinking to shed light on that other area of mystery. "Can you tell me a bit about the witchcraft?"

"Sure. I don't do it naked by moonlight, in case you were wondering? That's what most people think we do."

"Actually, I wasn't wondering about that." I'm lying. "How how long have you practised?"

"Since my teens. It started out as something different and rebellious – self empowering, you know. My friends and my sister and I had ourselves a little coven, operating out of my bedroom. We poured our hearts into our spellcraft, which was mostly about making particular boys fall in love with us, or particular teachers phone in sick with tummy ache, so our maths test would be cancelled. That sort of thing. Childish, I know. That's how the poetry started, I suppose. I liked making up spells – and spells always rhyme."

"They do?"

"Of course. It helps in remembering them. Don't you know *anything*?

"Then I grew up. I became a wife and mother, and forgot myself for a bit,... as you do... but then... after the accident... I really needed something, you know? And it's not so childish as it sounds, once you start to delve into it. It touches on all manner of things – psychology and philosophy, which chimed with me for obvious reasons. Also parapsychology, which also chimes these days."

"Does spellcraft work?"

"You're asking me, seriously?"

"Yes."

"Because really if you've a closed mind to start with there's no point in discussing it with you."

"I understand that, but I've been around, Adrienne. I've seen things I can't explain. Voodoo, in the Caribbean. Aboriginal shamans in the Australian outback doing healing, and inducing visions... it can't all be explained by that western scientific paradigm you talk about. So yes, I'm asking you seriously."

"Okay, well it depends how ambitious you are. If you know your limits and you're careful, I think you can bend things to your will, but like that time I wanted deliverance from washing pots in a restaurant kitchen, I've found things don't always work out the way you expect, and also, if you don't make a sacrifice in return, the universe will exact a price at random – and it may be something you don't want to lose.

"In parapsychology it's called psychokinesis. Ritual helps to focus the mind. Casting around the time of the full moon also helps. Don't believe in that? It's all documented. Anyone can get the papers off

the internet nowadays and see the evidence for themselves. It's something to do with the sun being in the magneto-tail of the earth. It's a small window of opportunity when the mind can interact with matter. You're smiling now?"

"No... I've read that stuff. ESP trials peak at certain times as well."

"You're okay with ESP?"

"Yes. You have to go with the evidence, which says it's proven – also precognition. So yes, I'm okay with it."

She points her nose at me. "Yet the prevailing scientific paradigm says it's hogwash."

"The prevailing paradigm is made up of old materialist naysayers, Adrienne. You've worked in academia, so you know that. And they're starting to look a bit stupid now. Is that what you did? Did you start talking about ESP and stuff in your lectures?"

"Oh, much worse than that. But anyway... I know what you're thinking."

"You do?"

"You're thinking if I believe in magic, why can't I magic my children from the States, or myself into a better job?"

She's being evasive again. "I wasn't thinking that,..."

"Well, I would be. And who's to say I haven't sought a little paranormal assistance from time to time. But like I said, you need to be careful what you ask for, and selective in the sacrifices you're prepared to make in return."

"Okay, when was the last time you sought paranormal assistance?"

"This morning, if you must know. I was backing the car out of the drive. It was a lovely morning, soft sunshine, a little dewy. And I thought of Bridy, my sister. And I said, come on, Bridy, am I really supposed to be living my life this way? Is there nothing we can do about it?"

I feel a shiver. Bridy! In the dream it had been Birdy, which is close enough for me to mark it out as something other than coincidence, close enough to have me believe I was indeed visited in my dreams by Adrienne's sister. I'm not sure my voice is steady when I go on: "And that was it? Just asking the question?"

She knows something's wrong, registers it with a twitch of her brows, but doesn't press me on it. "Sometimes that's all it takes. A moment of reflection. A moment of focus, and if you can couple

that with the presence of your familiars, psychic or otherwise, all the better."

"Familiars?"

"Yes... hard to explain without sounding ridiculous. Energies, shaped by one's mind into anthropomorphic forms – Daemons, Genus Loci, Faeries... gods, goddesses."

"And the next thing you know, you're stranded here with me? Your sister clearly has a sense of humour. Also your Genus Loci."

Adrienne's shaking her head. "Bridy could be mischievous, always pushing the boundaries, but I've learned to trust the intuitions she gives me. And I'm not downplaying this, Phil. It seemed a disaster at first when the sea came in and washed over the causeway like that, and a full hour ahead of time. But I've been thinking; I'm trapped here with you, yes, but you also happen to be the most interesting man I think I've ever met. I just don't know what that means, or what it is I'm supposed to do with you."

I feel a rush as her words inflate my ego, then a compensatory deflation as the pin of my atrophied self worth punctures it.

"It's all right," she tells me. "You can relax. I'm not looking for a man, just like I'm sure you're not looking for a woman, especially a seriously messed up one like me. At your age you need someone uncomplicated to darn your socks. I'd tell you to throw them away, and I'd give you a heart attack with my neurotic ways. Maybe I'm supposed to just talk to you. Tell you everything, confess all in this brief time between the tides. And why not? Maybe that's it! You're such a good listener Phil. Can I? Can I tell you *everything*?"

"What about?"

"The accident."

"You mean there's more?"

"Oh, yes,... I've not told you the really interesting bit yet. Are you sitting comfortably? Trust me, this is really going to rock that little rubber boat of yours."

Chapter 15

A Tunnel of Light

"They say sometimes you see a tunnel of light, don't they? You know... when people have a heart attack, or go into a coma. They regain consciousness with these tales of visiting an idyllic place and feeling themselves wrapped in love. They talk of their lives being transformed, like they've touched the divine, and suddenly they have a very clear idea of what it's all about.

"After the crash, when I was being stitched back together, my heart stopped. It's surprising how quickly you die after that – your brain needs so much oxygen you see? A couple of seconds, and then you're gone. That's all it takes. All brain function stops. You flatline. You die.

"But that's the weird bit. My first coherent memory after losing control of the car is of watching them trying to revive me in the hospital – you know? I'm looking over this nurse's shoulder. I've got no top on and my chest is smeared with grease and I'm thinking, do I really look like that in the third person?

"It isn't going well. They're wanting to slap those paddle things on me but there's been a cock up and the machine's broken. I hear someone shouting for another one. But there's so little time you see? The nurse exchanges a glance with the surgeon, and I can tell what they're thinking – that I'm unlikely to pull through, now. They don't say this, but I sort of feel it in them, and I'm touched they even care – I mean, I'm just this stranger, just one broken body among the thousands they must have seen in their workaday lives.

"So, that's it. I'm going to die, but really I don't care, because I'm obviously okay – feel quite well in fact. Then I notice a light off to one side and I move towards it. The light becomes a tunnel, dark and velvety at the edges, something bright at the end, and swirling slowly like a galaxy. There's no effort involved. I just seem to float along, going where my mind takes me. It was like dreaming I suppose, only more real. I was fully self aware. You know?

"And then I meet my dad. He's been gone a long time, and I do still miss him. He looks younger, stronger, fitter. A man in his prime. And it feels so wonderful, seeing him again, seeing him look so well. And there's no pain, no fear... just this wonderful, bright, sunlit place.

"It felt more real than anything I've ever experienced, Phil. Oh... I think I was shaping it with my mind because, where I ended up, it looked suspiciously like a little Greek resort Chuck and I went to on honeymoon – the most idyllic place – but that was okay. I understood a part of me was creating it, and maybe that's just the way it is on the other side, that we shape the environment with our minds, colour our experiences with our expectations, our fears.

"But there's my dad, hugging me, and talking to me, and he's real enough... and before you say anything, this *wasn't* a dream because, when I was experiencing all of this my brain was bloodless, lifeless, incapable of thought. And it wasn't an hallucination either, for the same reasons, and anyway hallucinations are crazy, chaotic things, and there I was feeling suddenly sharper, more alive and more aware than I've ever been in my whole life.

"So, the question is: How do you explain any of that? Can you even begin? You can say something now, Phil. Just take a breath first, or you'll faint."

I'm looking at a person who has died, a person who has broken through, broken into the fabled Summerland, dropped between the cracks of ordinary existence and returned to tell the tale.

"What did he say?"

"My father? He said I couldn't stay for long. He said I had to go back, and when I asked him why, he said there were still things I needed to do. It's a common theme in Near Death Experiences. He said I had to take care of the girls. Learn how to mend my life. Face the challenge of my life. And then Bridy was there, my sister.

"I remember she took my hand and started to lead me back. I didn't want to go. I wanted to stay with her and Dad. My body – this body, felt cold and messy and ugly and broken and I couldn't bear the thought of it again... but Bridy smiled so sweetly... and I love her so much, so I went with her." She gives a shudder. "It was like stepping back into a bath of cold snot.

"Then I woke up, and for a while I was bathed in this blissful glow, but then my mother was in my face and telling me the news about Chuck and the girls, and I was wondering if it wasn't just a dream after all – all that stuff about taking care of things and healing my life, and me thinking for a moment I'll do it, I'll really do it, you know? I'll patch things up with Chuck and go to America like he wants."

She blinks, looks away, suddenly a shy schoolgirl, her eyes finally resting on her shoes. "It's not exactly worked out the way I thought, though."

"You mean Chuck taking the girls?"

"In part, yes. But I was also thinking it was the biggest thing ever to happen to me psychologically – and that was interesting, I mean from a professional point of view. It pointed me in the direction of all the literature, of all those other accounts like mine, and I felt I had to include it in my course materials. I felt I had to lecture on it."

"Ah!..." Sure, why wouldn't she? A thing like that, it changes your life. I would have felt compelled to do the same, and likely suffered the same consequences.

"Death is an important part of life, Phil. But it's not the end. I know you were afraid to die in that rubber boat. But I'm confident there is another side, because I think I've been there. I suppose you have to experience something like that to be assured of it. But there it is. And not to talk about it in my academic life, to go on presenting orthodox theories of consciousness that basically describes it all as an illusion? And that the brain is a computer made of meat. I couldn't do that any more. If they'd not constructed my dismissal, I would have had to leave anyway."

She gives me that thin smile again, half humour, half serious. "So, that's my story."

She doesn't ask if I believe her. I can see she needs no reassurance on that score. But she's still troubled. From our limited perspective, even to be assured of everlasting life solves nothing. It just poses an even more complicated puzzle out of it. And what kind of cosmos would create the illusion of mortality, then make our skins so soft, and our lives at times so very, very hard?

Chapter 16

Book of Shadows

She checks her watch. Two thirty a.m. now. I've known her for twelve hours, but I've already shared more with this woman than I have with any other human being.

"Are you hungry?" she asks.

The last thing on my mind is food. "I haven't really thought about it."

"I know, me neither. We should eat something though. I have a packet of crackers in the car and some cottage cheese. It was going to be my lunch, but I didn't get the chance. It's slim pickings but I'll share it with you if you like."

"Okay, thanks. I've got some boiled sweets in my pocket. It's not much of a combination, I suppose."

"Better than nothing. We'll save the sweets for later, when we're fainting for want of sugar. And, I don't know, but I'm ready to chance another cup of that awful coffee, if you are."

"Okay."

She brushes the hair from her face and smiles. Am I still sleeping? I take a coin from my pocket and I turn it over. It's a signal I've programmed into myself since watching the movie "Inception", a strange story about lucid dreams within lucid dreams, within lucid dreams, a veritable labyrinth of dream-time in which it can be difficult to discern the grosser forms of reality without some form of symbolic maguffin. The coin is my maguffin. If the reality is gross, what you might term "normal", I will see a heads on one side of the coin and a tails on the other. If I am in the dreamscape, it'll be a double headed coin – the surprise of which is usually enough to jolt me awake, unless I take steps to persist within it.

I do it now.

Not dreaming.

"Are you all right?" she asks.

What does she mean by this? She sought no reassurance over the fact of her near death experience, so what she means now is how does this address the balance between us? Does it throw us out of kilter because I can't believe in something so outlandish as that, or does it draw us into a closer trim because we are kindred spirits, kindred mystics? I listen to the rain still hammering against the

glass for a moment.

"I'm all right. But look, you'll get soaked if you go outside. Let me go."

"I'll be fine."

I follow her through to the kitchen, then watch as she opens the door on the blackness. The wind and the rain roar in and she gasps, her hair blown backwards by it. I can see more of a redness to it now. It could be the light, or my imagination, but I sense it's her natural colour. I have a vision of her, pale skinned, red haired, naked, her back turned to me as she welcomes the rising of a full moon. Adrienne Divine, the witch, the magician, follower of the old ways! Her sister too, Bridy. Two witches, one either side of the illusion of mortality.

She takes a breath and darts outside. Then I wait. I fumble in my jacket pocket among the loose change and the keys and the fluff and, one by one, I fish out the sweets. I'm thinking: a red haired, pale-skinned girl. She's lying on a table, blouse torn asunder, breasts vulnerable, invisible to the handful of clinicians focussed on jolting her heart back to life. And while her brain has flat-lined, the more vital part of her is floating free. It's such a narrow divide – the point of death, I mean. I'd fetched up just this side of it and was terrified of that final step. She'd found herself nudged a little further, found herself wrapped in its sweet embrace, and was as reluctant to return to life, as I had been to leave it.

I check the inside pocket of my jacket and take out a notebook. It's fairly new, spiral-bound with a soft leatherette cover and a simple leaf motif. Only the first few pages have been scrawled upon - telephone numbers, bits of shopping list. I tear them out, restore its pristine blankness, then set it aside as a gift for Adrienne, before turning my attention to preparing the table with knives and forks and plates for our feast.

She comes back in, trailing rain and wind, and leaning back upon the door to slam out the weather. She's a mess – dripping wet and shivering, arms outstretched, fingertips down-pointing, dribbling water. Her hair's hanging in rat-tails, her blouse plastered to her skin so I can even see the laced design of her bra underneath, and her blue skirt is now black with wet, clinging to her thighs as if she's just risen from the sea.

I think of laughing, but think better of it. "You should change."

She gives me a patient look. "Into what?"

"I don't know. A towel? A blanket? Then you can set your clothes to dry by the fire."

"Nice try."

"Adrienne, after all we've shared these few brief hours, we're as good as married anyway, but... maybe there's a frock in one of the wardrobes upstairs. You can't sit like that until morning."

She wrinkles her nose."Mrs Fox's clothes? Sorry. I'd rather catch my... death. No, that's not funny is it?"

"Amelia won't mind."

"Amelia is it? You're on good terms with her I see."

"She'll be fine with it. Trust me."

Adrienne shakes her head. "I hope for both our sakes she doesn't turn out to be a hungry ghost."

"I thought you weren't afraid of ghosts."

"There are ghosts and then there are *ghosts*, Phil. The hungry ones will seriously mess with your head."

She kicks off her shoes and trots upstairs, leaving me to dwell on this. She's a while, drying herself, and it's all I can do to stop imagining her nude, towelling her body. There's something dangerously erotic about it, yet in the same breath I fear it, and the blood in my veins evaporates, leaving my loins limp as usual. Pathetic, Phil. Just when was the last time you felt a real swelling arousal at the thought of a naked woman?

I hear the rattle of coat hangers as she searches for something acceptable to put on. She's not in Amelia's room. She's found a back-bedroom. A daughter perhaps? She finally comes down in a long yellow sun-frock with a cardigan over her shoulders. It's very pretty, but she's embarrassed, avoiding my eye and the necessity of asking me what I think. Then she makes a joke about it being only a small pot of cottage cheese and hardly worth the effort of setting the table, but she admires me for my domesticity.

I'm mute, staring at her. It's the dress that Birdy was wearing in the dream.

She registers my unease once again with a little twitch of her eyebrows, but this time she presses me on it. "What?"

"Adrienne, I'm sorry, but I think I've dreamed of your sister. And she was wearing that dress."

She gives me a dark look as if to say it's not funny.

"Those pendants you wear, they were hers," I tell her. "She had others as well - a ban the bomb thing, and a girl riding the moon.

And she had her name engraved, each letter on a silver bead, but in my dream it read Birdy, not Bridy. I'm sorry."

Her lips go pale and she sits down. "She came to you?"

"I... I think so."

"It was a gift," she says. "I mean the necklace. We were in Penzance, on holiday. You had to make the necklace yourself from individual beads – string them onto a silk cord. I remember she complained because my name was longer and cost her nearly twice as much to make as mine did to her, and I made a mistake, got the beads mixed up. But it was fine, because I called her Birdy after that, and she liked it."

"Penzance?"

"Yes... why?"

"I was there with my father once... and in the dream, I was returning from Cornwall, from Penzance, in my father's old VW Camper. Except Birdy was with me."

She nods in a kind of understanding. "It was the last holiday we had together. By the following summer, she was gone."

"My father too. I'm sorry, Adrienne. I don't know what this means."

She looks at me tenderly. "It's all right. I don't know what it means either. But don't be afraid. You're not afraid are you?"

"I am, a little bit afraid, yes. I've seen some weird stuff, but nothing like this, nothing on this scale, and certainly not pointing at me all the time."

She moves to the chair beside mine and takes my hand. "Me too, remember." She's warm and tender suddenly and I can feel my heart aching. "Typical Birdy," she says. "I suppose you were in love with her. Why wouldn't you be? She always did have a habit of stealing my boyfriends." She lets go of my hand, pats it, then laughs. "Sorry. I didn't mean anything by that. But what am I going to do with you?"

Hold me, Adrienne. Let me lay my head against your breast and go to sleep. "What's a hungry ghost?"

She gives me a playful twinkle. "You really want to know?"

"I don't think I want to, but I think I might need to."

"It's a spirit who doesn't make it all the way to the afterlife. They're too attached to their earthly existence – usually not of good character, or sometimes just confused... if you believe in that sort of thing."

"And do *you* believe in that sort of thing?"

She demurs. "There are stories... that's all, but so long as you don't go looking for them, they'll leave you alone. I'm told mostly they like to scare the pants off teenage girls who mess with oija boards."

"Have you ever done that?"

She shakes her head. "It's always best to let the dead rest. It's the only sensible piece of advice my mother ever gave me."

"But what if they come looking for you?"

"That's different, but there's usually a personal connection, or you have to have opened a door to them somehow, otherwise I wouldn't worry about it."

She shivers as if someone has stepped over her grave, then she hugs herself. "Tell me about your dream. Describe her to me."

So I tell her, describe Birdy, but leave out the embarrassing bit, and she thinks a while and then she says. "Do you believe dreams are meaningful?"

"Yes... sometimes prescient too. But it doesn't do to expect anything logical from them. The meaning is always wrapped up in the symbols, in their associations, and they're personal."

"Tell me about Gramps."

"I've always felt him around – ever since my childhood. Something in his photograph, something wise and wily and sympathetic – a good man to have on your side. But the first time I had a really clear vision of him was during my time in the lifeboat, the second night, when I was feeling scared and alone and probably a bit delirious too. He helped me to hang on – saved my sanity I think, but at the cost of tearing open a little bit of my mind, so strange things could leak through from time to time."

"Is Gramps here now?"

"No. I usually smell his tobacco first."

"But he *has* been here?"

"Yes, I saw him down at the beach this afternoon, and earlier, in the lounge with Amelia. He was drinking tea and she was knitting. They have a meaning, when they come together like that." I give a helpless shrug. "But I don't know what it is."

"And I suppose that's his ring you keep twirling on your finger?"

How she can know this I'm not sure. It could be anybody's ring, but I'm not dealing with an ordinary person here."Yes. My mother gave it to me when I left home – after graduating."

"Your mother was superstitious?"

"Yes – black cats and walking under ladders and all that."

She twirls her wedding ring, then holds it up for me to see. "My great-great grandmother's. Another coincidence? Gifted to me by my mother when I graduated and left home. How do they appear to you?"

"I don't see them as real – mostly imagination, like something I'm making up. But when they speak, they do make sense."

"And what are they telling you?"

"I think Amelia would like me to buy the house, make a go of it – donkey sanctuary and all, if I must, so long as it remains a home. And Gramps... he's not said much yet. But I think he likes you."

The dress is strappy, which is why she's wearing the cardigan, to cover her shoulders. The pendants gather in a little coil upon the table-top as she leans over. She takes them up and touches the tree of life to her lips, strokes them with it. There's a tremor in her hand, an unsteadiness to her breath. "None of this is an accident, Phil. I'm sorry, but I asked for this. I provoked the fates, and they drew you to me, lured you into this trap."

"We were just unlucky with the tide."

"Maybe," she says. "But if I'm right, unless we can work out what's going on here, I doubt we'll be leaving in the morning."

"Oh?"

"Something will happen. The tides will be all messed up again, or there'll be ten feet of snow."

"In June?"

"Sorry. You know what intuitions are like? Or it may just be that it's late, and I say stupid things at this hour. Coffee then?"

It's at this point, I slide the notebook between us. She looks at it. "What's this?"

"I want you to have it. It's blank. I... I think you should start writing poetry again."

She's amused. "You do?"

"Yes. Or use it as your book of,... what d'ya m'call them?"

"Shadows?"

"Yes."

"Do you even know what a Book of Shadows is, Phil?"

"No, but it sounds mysterious, and it was once meaningful to you. It's where the poetry began. You told me that yourself. And I think you should get back to what was once meaningful to you. I'll

be more the mystic, if you can be more the witch and the poet."

"Why so serious?"

"I... I don't know. I think it's important. Like you said, this seems less like an accident. I think we're both going to leave Leven Island different somehow. I feel different already for having talked to you this way, and yet there was a point this afternoon when I thought I'd never get anything out of you, not even my proper name. Maybe if you wrote a poem, while you were here, and carried it away with you, it would be like a lucky charm, like carrying away a piece of the sanctuary, a piece of the magic."

Her forefinger lights upon the book and she feels the texture of the cover. Then she draws her hand to her chin, pensive at first, but a moment later there comes a flicker of brightness. "You say such strange things, Phil. But don't be afraid to keep on saying them. All right. I will. I'll write something."

"And let me see it?"

She smiles. "More than that, I'll make a gift of it to you."

Something in the way she says this reminds me we don't have for ever, that in the morning we'll be quitting Leven Isle, that her poem will be a gift in parting. But how can she? How can she think of abandoning me so soon, when I've spent my whole life looking for her?

Now she's splattering cottage cheese on dry biscuits. They're brittle and breaking to crumbs under the pressure of the knife. "Do you want some of this or not?" Then suddenly she changes tack and hangs her head.

"What am I going to do, Phil?"

This is not an idle question. I wait for clarification, her eyes are a little misty now and twinkling as she goes on: "Can you read near death experiences like a dream? Something in the symbols, rather than the words, do you think?"

"I don't understand, Adrienne."

So she spells it out for me – the key dilemma of her life:

"What had I to come back for? Why couldn't I just have died and be done with it?"

Chapter 17

Remember me

As she says this I have a vision of light behind her, and a door opening on a misty vortex into which she's about to fall. I remember her teetering on the bottom step and my hand frozen mid-air, too self conscious to help her. I grab her now. Suddenly my hands are holding onto her arms as they lie in her lap, and I'm not sure if I'm imagining this, but she feels so warm, and she's looking at me in surprise, so it must be real, mustn't it? But the vortex is imaginary. She isn't really going to fall, isn't really going to be sucked back in.

"Phil?"

"Sorry." I let go, blushing. "I..."

"What?"

"You couldn't die."

"Why not?"

"Because... because you're too beautiful to die."

Stupid! An ill thought thing to say. But so much is being said now it comes as no surprise to me, and anyway one more *faux pas* can hardly make a difference. She's laughing, but not unkindly. "Oh, Phil. What difference does that make? And I'm not beautiful. If you see me that way, then I'm flattered, and you do my self confidence the world of good. But really, my arse is too big and my tits are too small, and my hair's all grey with a texture like dried straw unless I spend a fortune on it."

"No, your hair's naturally red, but you darken it so as not to draw attention to yourself."

She gives a surprised gasp. "Am I so obvious?" And then, teasing: "I notice you didn't contradict me over my other imperfections."

When a woman starts to criticise her appearance to a man, it's better he keeps his own counsel after a point. Beyond it, he's either sweet-talking her into bed, or asking for a black eye.

"Please,... you're tying me in knots. But seriously – no more talk of wishing you'd died. Okay? You came back because it's not your time. Your life's not over, Adrienne. You've still such a lot to do. Your girls are thinking of you right now. I know they are."

She smiles. "You think so?"

"Of course. Do you write to them?"

"Yes. Emails. Texts."

"Write letters. Old fashioned letters. Letters are for keeps. Emails and texts are so easily deleted."

"Makes sense. Yes... I'll write. The old fashioned way. I think I can still remember how."

The rain roars suddenly loud against the windows, making any further conversation impossible without shouting. Adrienne bides her time now, tunes into the roar, as the black of the night is lit in quick succession with strobes of blue. As storms go, I've never seen anything like it. Moving into the lounge, where the fire has a cosy feel to it, I gaze out through the French windows, opaque with rain, and I see clouds lit with intermittent flashes, their tops aflame and showering sparks, and sending spheres of light into the upper atmosphere.

I see her face reflected in the glass as she stands behind me. There's something unsettling about her gaze. She's not looking at the storm, but at me. I turn and smile, thinking I might have said the wrong thing, but she's not there. She's still in the kitchen, at the table, contemplating the backs of her hands. I feel a shiver and realise it was Birdy I must have seen. Behind me.

Help me Birdy, help me to do the right thing here.

I settle another log upon the fire, then flop down upon the sofa, tired now. She comes through with coffee and perches beside me, almost touching, sipping thoughtfully at the bitter brew. As I drink, I feel that bitterness bursting on my tongue like fireworks. It has a quality to it, something short of repulsive, and I feel it restoring a sharpness in me that weariness had rendered fuzzy. It also renders me bolder with Adrienne.

"Can I buy you breakfast tomorrow?"

She nods absently. "Full English?"

"Of course."

"It's a date. There's a tearoom at Arnside. We can try there."

I feel a foolish swelling of warmth and satisfaction. "A date?"

She smiles and shakes her head. "You know what I mean."

A rebuff, but a tender one. I find I can be philosophical about it and I take a breath. A date – how childish!

Picture this if you can, me and Adrienne, strangers in a strange house, still talking in the small hours of the morning, our faces illumined by the cherry glow of a log fire. In her paleness, I now read a ghostly transparency, and fear she might at any time fade out, become no more real to me than Birdy, in my dreams. How can

I keep her in the world? How can I give her colour? How can I restore the vibrancy of her connection with all that lives and breathes and thrums with vitality?

"What would she advise, do you think?" I ask, gesturing to the imaginary Mrs Fox as she knits a little more of our reality. "I mean,... regarding your situation. Your kids in America, Chuck wanting a divorce?"

She rallies to the challenge and gives it some thought. "A woman of her generation? Same as my mother, probably. Edwardian common sense. Patience. Courage. She'd tell me to stop being such a cry-baby, and just get on with it."

"Which is exactly what you're doing. Everything will be all right." But even as I say it, I know it for the platitude it is – empty, unskilled, and careless in delivery.

"I can't go to America, Phil, so how is everything going to be all right? Better I stay here with you and hide away from it all, let the tide close over our footprints, erase all trace of us."

"Why can't you go to America. Is it just the money?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"Haven't you worked it out yet? Haven't you discovered my shameful little secret? I'm a wreck. I don't know what you see when you look at me, but it's an act. It's all I can do to drive from Carnforth to Leven Isle. I get confused in Lancaster, and it's not exactly a metropolis. Don't be fooled. I'm clueless. Hopeless. I've barely the confidence to post a letter these days. I stand at the letter box and wonder if I've put everything in the envelope that I should, and when I do pluck up the courage to finally let go of the damned thing, I'm wondering if I've remembered to put the stamp on it."

"But we all feel like that when we're low, when our energy's gone. You'll get it back. You'll see!"

She gives a firm shake of her head, so her hair is now spread all over her face, a russet veil in mourning. "They're lost to me, the girls, swallowed up by the world, and the world's this mad creature I've always held at arm's length, because I can barely cope with it myself. I hate the world, Phil. I hate people. If I lived here, I'd be fending day-trippers off with a shot-gun."

"You just need someone to hold your hand."

"But I don't have friends like that. I'm like you. I get by as best I can on my own."

"Then I'll come with you."

"What?" she laughs, astonished, but she's also worried, wondering if I'm serious, which I am, worried if I'm manoeuvring to make a fool of myself, worried she'll have to make a fool of me in order to maintain her distance. "But... but... aren't you afraid of flying?"

"Why would I be afraid of flying?"

She gives me that patient look. "Because you crashed into the sea once, and everyone with you drowned. That sounds like a good excuse for having a phobia about flying to me."

"No, that was a helicopter. And you're right, you'll never get me on one of those again. But a jet airliner's no problem. You know how it is? Phobias are weird. Look, I'm just saying... if you need someone to hold your hand."

"Phil... you don't fancy me or anything do you? I mean, I'm really not open to invitations right now. As you can probably tell I'm hardly at my best, and any kind of relationship would just end in disaster for us both."

"I understand that perfectly. And of course I don't fancy you."

Was that a flicker of disappointment? Ooh, nicely played, Phil! Even thought it was accidental.

"What? You don't? Oh... well... that's all right then."

"You're not my type. You said yourself, you're too thin, you've got a small arse and big tits. And your hair's always a mess."

She looks at me for a long time, just reading me, then laughs. "Big arse and no tits. Oh, Phil, you darling man."

I may be mistaken, but I have the feeling something meaningful has passed between us. This flirtatious banter would not happen if we were truly strangers. We would be as we'd been on the drive over – buttoned up and paranoid, like everyone else for the first seventy two hours of any relationship. I've known her now for fourteen hours, yet feel I've known her all my life, and she must feel it too, or she could not be like this with me. But I must hide from it for now, or at any rate not make too much of it for fear it will shrivel for want of light and air.

"Let me heat that water bottle up for you."

"Okay," she contemplates the bottom of her cup. "I think I'm ready for some more of this rancid coffee as well. It's growing on me. What do you think?"

"Good idea. It has a certain something."

She looks coy for a moment. "And Phil?...."

"Hmm?"

"You really think I've got big tits?"

"Adrienne, please..."

I take my time in the kitchen, filling the kettle to the top, so it will take an age to boil and allow me more time to think. I can feel the coffee now, peeling open my eyelids and filling the cracks in my head with something peculiarly lucid, which is good because I don't want to sleep again for fear of wasting a single moment of my time with her.

I admire her so. She has the defences of a battle tank, even though, inside, I know by now she's just this frightened little girl, pulling awkwardly at the controls, jerking her emotions this way and that. Why is it different this time? I suppose it's because I've never looked at a woman before and wanted so little from her, indeed wanted nothing but to heal and nurture her.

Adrienne is stuck, but she's also magnificent, and I want to help her turn that magnificence back upon the world, and make a difference. Though, naturally, I also have to be prepared at some stage to let her go, otherwise it's no different to the way it's always been, no different to any other relationship I've ever embarked upon: *that I simply want her to want me.*

I fill the bottle, wrap the towel around it then feel the warmth of it in my hands, and imagine that same heat radiating deep into Adrienne's belly, comforting her. Seriously Phil – who are you kidding? That's probably the only pain you're going to be able to ease.

She's on the couch when I return, tucked up like before, leaning against the pillow, and she's writing in the notebook. When I hand her the bottle, she tears out the page and gives it to me as if in exchange. It's Rossetti's *Remember Me*, transcribed from memory.

Remember me when I am gone away,
Gone far away into the silent land;
When you can no more hold me by the hand,
Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay...

I sit down and read it through. "I do love this poem," I tell her. "Even though it's for funerals."

She laughs. "Or other kinds of farewell. If we never see each

other again, you'll always have something to remember me by. Or if it's true and it's for a funerals, you can read it at mine."

"Okay. But so long as you're not in any hurry."

"I'm in no hurry."

"Seriously,... you're *not* in any hurry,... are you?"

"Of course not." She thinks a while, thinks back on her experience. "They say if you report a deep NDE like that, you're less likely to pull through afterwards. You give up on life, because life's such a pale reflection of what you've seen, or what you believe things could really be like. It brings the world we live in into sharper focus, shows it for the loveless place it's always been."

"It's not loveless, Adrienne. It's chaotic, and violent, and so terribly cruel at times, but it's also full of people who love each other, and it's people who make it such fertile ground in which love can grow."

"And wither."

"Your girls will *always* love you. Birdy too. And your dad."

She gives me a twinkle. "The difference is they don't need me. Knowing what I do... what would be so wrong in calling it a day? What if there was a painless poison pill, here in the palm of my hand? Why shouldn't I take it?"

I know several answers to this one, most of them trite, most of them the distant cousins of vague platitudes, so I'm going to have to try very hard here. Then I realise she's already answered for me, a while ago.

"When you made it through, and met your dad and your sister, you were innocent. You weren't expecting anything. But now... now your feelings of life are soured. What if you become a hungry ghost? What if you're held back by your negative emotions?"

She knows I'm right. She fears it too, fears she'll never taste the Summerlands again. "Are you afraid I'll haunt you?"

"You'd be welcome. But really... I'm guessing our best chance is to go with a peaceful heart. And you're not at peace, Adrienne. We have to find our peace here, in this world first. Or we'll struggle to find it in the next."

She shakes her head, but there's more to it than resistance. "I don't need to find it," she says.

"Oh?"

"Just keep talking to me. And Phil?"

"Hm?"

"Thank you for taking me seriously."

I'm blushing now. "You're welcome, Adrienne. You mustn't give up on your children, you know? Remember their birthdays. Grit your teeth and weather those excruciating Skype video conference things – which I admit sound dreadful. But just... do whatever it takes. And visit them. I mean it about holding your hand if you want to go and see them. And no, I don't fancy you in that way, and that's not why I'm saying it."

"Why else would you do it? I'm just some woman trying to sell you a house."

"You've never tried to sell me this house."

"That's because I clocked you as a time waster as soon as I saw you."

"And it's true... I'd already changed my mind about it before I met you. I was being polite, if you must know. But now I think I'd really like to live here."

"You're talking rubbish."

"No... and Adrienne, you *will* write that poem, won't you? And you'll let me have a copy, like you promised. It would mean so much to me."

"All right."

She shakes her head, wishing perhaps we could change the subject, but she's holding on because she's not sure she's lost the nerve for it yet, and there might be one last revelation worth waiting for.

"I'll buy half this house, Adrienne."

She laughs, puzzled. "What use is that? You can't just buy half of it. What are you talking about?"

"You buy the other half. We'll share it. We can live here together, like this... it'll be fun."

There it's said. And I'm only half joking.

Chapter 18

Housemates

She's laughing out loud now, but as she laughs, there comes a haunted look as if she's half worried, or half hoping, I might be serious.

"You're crazy."

"I know. I thought we'd already established that. I was rather hoping you were crazy enough as well to take me up on it. But, yes. Of course I'm joking."

She doesn't look as relieved as I'd thought she might. She had considered it. She really *had*!

"What would we do here?" she says. "Oh... I forgot. You want to keep donkeys."

"You could write poetry. And I could... I don't know... there's several years of work just repairing that drystone wall. And in the evenings I'd do my drawings – even though in the great scheme of things both would seem equally pointless. I mean pointless from a certain perspective."

"A certain perspective?"

"They'd be like letters, Adrienne – like those letters you hesitate to post because you think you got something wrong. Except, it wouldn't matter. They'd be letters to your muse, and she always knows what you mean."

"Only men have muses. Girls don't."

"Of course girls have muses. A muse isn't sexist - she'll make use of any waking consciousness to get her point across."

"You're serious about the drawing?"

"Why not? You're not the only one with a frustrated talent, you know? And like I said, even trained artists die in obscurity – even after a lifetime of trying to court recognition. So why not accept obscurity from the outset, simply enjoy the run of our own thoughts, our own dreams. It's not like we'd be short of company – there are so many ghosts here already."

She's smiling, nodding, either assuming or hoping I'm not serious, because then she'd have to take it seriously too and reject it outright, and she doesn't want to do that. She wants to play with the idea. "Why drawing?"

"Because sometimes you need something simple, like a pencil

and a blank piece of paper to make sense of a complex situation. You trim it down, edit out anything that's not relevant."

I can see her thinking about this, nodding slowly as if she understands. Then she hands me back the notebook I'd given her. "Can you work with Biro?" She takes a pen out of her bag, a delicate little shaft of silver. It feels magical as it settles in my fingers.

"Draw me," she says.

"Em,... sometimes I'm a bit hit and miss with Biro."

"Early with the excuses. Phil? It doesn't matter. Draw me."

So as the small hours count down to an uncertain dawn, I draw her reclining on the sofa. She holds the hot water bottle to her tummy with one hand, the other to her chin. Her feet are tucked under, her gaze levelled on me, searching, little lines of query radiating from the corners of her eyes.

A drawing is like a Rorschach, blot, one of those apparently meaningless splats in which you see the things your unconscious mind is supposedly preoccupied with. The only difference with a drawing is you start with a blank sheet, and unconsciously emphasise those things that preoccupy you. With Adrienne, it's her eyes, her poise, also her hair, and the ring on her finger, all of which I render in a more carefully delineated form than I need to.

And then there are the Freudian omissions, the things we suppress – case in point, I deliberately avoid making a fuss of her bosom. Delicate though it is, I could have filled it out a bit more – but I'm embarrassed to because I have already identified this spot as the cushion of my soul, its balm, its rest. Her surroundings I've blurred to an abstract haze, capturing only a few crinkles of the sofa, leaving the rest to the imagination. It takes me half an hour and throughout it all she doesn't move, doesn't speak. She has great presence, great stillness.

When I hand her the drawing, she's impressed, I think, and I'm childishly pleased about that. I could spend my life drawing her, posting my muse online, every delightful inch of her, but I realise that would be a bad thing with only vanity behind it. "Here," I'd be saying, "Look at this woman. This woman is *mine*."

But we can never possess others, no matter how much we love them.

"It's true then. You *do* draw. This is lovely, Phil. But too flattering."

"A matter of opinion."

She smiles, blushes a little. "Oh, but there's that silver tongue again. It's like being caressed with a velvet glove." And then: "All right,... getting back to the question of our moving in together – not that I'm taking you up on it, you oaf. How do you imagine it would work, us cast away out here in our frustrated artist's studio? I mean... and sorry to be so blunt, but since we're being so mysteriously and recklessly open with each other, are you proposing marriage to me?"

"Marriage? Hell, I don't fancy you that much!"

Even though she knows I'm joking, and I know she knows I'm joking, she looks crestfallen, as if she *can* conceive of it, and I regret making that joke, because I can conceive of it too: marriage, life, togetherness, with this stranger, here. Now. But the meaning is deeper, lost in our clumsiness. If only I could simply feel her meaning and she could feel mine I swear there would be the most perfect, subtle understanding, and a flowering of great happiness between us.

"What then?" she asks, then taps the drawing. "It's just that you seem inordinately fascinated by my wedding ring here."

"You noticed that? Yes... I think it's the fact that you're still married that makes me nervous."

She slips off her ring, slides it onto the middle finger of her right hand instead. "There. Is that better? Now I'm divorced. So... humour me. How do imagine it working?"

"Why can't we just be like this. We get on, don't we?"

She holds up her palms as if to press me away. "Phil... I forgive you. This is all a little stressful. You're probably in need of sugar... why not suck one of those boiled sweets? In fact, hand one over. I think I need some sugar myself. I don't think I've had as big a shock as this since the accident. Can I keep it, by the way?"

"The drawing? Of course. Something to remember our time by."

"Thanks... but I don't think I'll need much reminding."

I hand her a boiled sweet, and we suck on them thoughtfully. I'm feeling strange, light headed. Perhaps she's right, and we're low on sugar.

I'd like to tell you I'm not serious in anything, that I'm being... I don't know... ironic, or exploring the blue sky possibilities with the dispassionate air of a borderline-insane intellectual. But a part of me is also thinking why not? And I swear she's thinking the same:

"How much have you got?" she asks. The sweet is tucked up and

making a lump in her cheek, lending a casual, almost comically dismissive tone to her question. "I mean... not that I'm a material kind of girl, but let's talk finances here."

"Okay. My house is on the market for five hundred thousand. I have a hundred thousand in savings and investments. You sell your mews. That's what? another hundred and fifty? Making seven hundred and fifty."

She tots it up on her fingers. "This place is on for two hundred thousand. So we'd still have half a million plus change. Even at the measly interest rates they're paying these days we could live cheaply off that for as long as we wanted." She gives an approving look. "Now that's interesting!"

"Exactly. It should see us both out without having to risk anything in investments. Unless you have any expensive habits I'm unaware of?"

She looks insulted. "Such as what?"

"I don't know – I hardly know you – but there may be something. Designer shoes perhaps? Expensive handbags? A massive credit card debt?"

"No. It's you I'm worried about – you've lived longer than me – more time to acquire unusual vices."

"Well, apart from offering to spend the rest of my life on a deserted island with a woman I only met yesterday, no, my appetites are fairly dull, and inexpensive."

"We both sound perfectly eligible then. And those drystone walls could do with a bit of maintenance? I like the sound of those dogs as well, but are you really sure about the donkeys? They sound like a lot of trouble to me."

"I was rather set on the donkeys. And you already said I couldn't have any cats."

"All right then. You can keep the donkeys. They'll probably grow on me. But *definitely* no cats."

"I already promised. No cats."

"Well... normally I'd be flattered, and on the surface it does sound like a good idea – especially the six hundred thousand you'd be bringing to the table - but there's something we're both forgetting here."

"Oh?"

"We'd probably have to have sex, and I'm not sure I fancy you that much either."

I give her a mock grimace. "Aghh! I was forgetting that. But would we have to? I mean,.. it's not *compulsory*,... is it?"

"Well... no... but it would be *normal*. A man and a woman, cast away on an island together. Most people would think it was normal."

"They would?"

She nods. "They'd more or less *expect* it, Phil."

We've bantered ourselves into dangerous territory again. Suddenly I blink and find myself standing in the middle of a minefield. She reads it too.

"Phil?"

Do I tell her or not?

"I... ah..."

Something strikes her, and she thinks she's got it, but her intuition's a little off. "Sorry... I've been a bit slow..." Her expression is one of Eurkea! "It all makes sense now. My gaydar always was a bit wonky."

"Your what? What? You think I'm *gay*?"

"Not married, not fancying women... except you said you'd lived with women, which I admit is a bit confusing." She shakes her head. "I'm losing it. I'm really puzzled now. I just can't work you out at all."

"It's not complicated. I'm... impotent."

She slaps her hand over her mouth, but not firmly enough to prevent her first thoughts from taking flight as hasty words:. "Oh, God! That's much worse! I mean... no that came out wrong – I'm so sorry, Phil."

"It's okay. Antidepressants have a habit of doing that to you, at least that's what I'm told. I haven't been on them for years, but – well – things seem to be a little slow in getting back to normal."

"Have you seen a doctor?"

"No. It's not something that need concern a man when he's no woman in his life – though I must admit it sort of puts you off trying to find one when you're physically bent out of shape like that."

She laughs. "Sorry... not funny."

"What? Oh... *bent*. Yes... Yes it was funny, actually. You have a wicked sense of humour, Adrienne."

"So... you really can't?"

I feel myself blushing crimson. "I think we've established that.

Now can we talk about something else, please?"

"All right... but there you are you see? That's another reason we can't live together. I don't want saddling with a eunuch – even if he is rich and debt free, can draw like Michelangelo and wants to save the world's donkeys from unnecessary suffering. If I have to have a man in my life again at least I want him in working order, just in case I should ever feel the urge again myself – which I doubt, by the way – but there you are."

"Thank you for your sympathy, Ms Divine."

But there *is* sympathy. It's in her face, her eyes, and it's breaking my heart, because there's nothing so emotional as feeling the genuine emotion others have for you. "Shall I heat that bottle up for you again?"

She nods.

It doesn't actually need heating up this time, indeed I nearly scald myself as I tip it out down the sink, but we're both in need of an excuse to withdraw, to breathe and regroup. There are people I've worked with for twenty years who know absolutely nothing about me. Even the women I've lived with would say I was largely an enigma. But in the space of a few short hours, I have revealed everything to this woman, to this stranger.

Adrienne.

Everything!

What the Hell is it about this place, or about her that's bringing this out of us?

Chapter 19

Reading minds

So... I'm in the kitchen and I'm waiting for the kettle to boil, and while I wait I think about what I've told her – that I'm impotent, that there's so little pressure in the boiler room these days I can barely raise sufficient head of steam for an anaemic dribble, let alone the kind of vigorous manly pleasuring a woman like Adrienne deserves. Sorry – too much, I know. But that's my ego, and one more example of a loss of face, a loss of self esteem these past years.

If you'll forgive me another prurient aside, I close my eyes and imagine her walking in, unzipping my trousers, lifting my sex into her palms, then sliding the flaccid shaft into her mouth. I try to imagine the warm wetness of it, and I wait for something to stir. Please God, let there be *something*!

But there's nothing!

Then I feel her hand on my arm. "Phil?"

When I open my eyes she's there – I mean really there – and her hand is massaging the life back into me... *into my arm*.

"You mustn't be afraid," she says.

"Of what?"

She gives my arm a playful tap. "I mean of being with a woman, silly – because of,.. you know,... *that*."

"Oh, I know. But you can see my point. It's just it's not the sort of thing that normally comes up on a first date."

She smirks. "Sorry."

I give her a patient look. "I mean, it's not the sort of thing one mentions straight off, is it? It presumes a future sexual relationship, and that's impolite, presumptuous, even if it turns out to be true in the end, and then you worry if you leave it too long before mentioning it, the girl will think you've deceived her, and then you've got this girl and you can't do anything with her so you end up hurting her. It's just easier, and there's less hurt all round, if you simply don't bother."

"Do you always over analyse things completely out of existence this way?"

"Probably, yes."

"Were you like this... with the women you've lived with?"

"It started to fade with the last one... with Stevie."

"Stevie?"

"Stephanie."

"Not a good relationship, then?"

"Draining. She carried a lot of pain around from past entanglements. A lot of heavy emotion. She had a habit of feeding off everyone else. I'm not saying it was her fault. The pills are notorious for doing it to you as well. Mostly, I blame the pills. But as soon as I lost it she'd no need for me any more, and moved out. And really I don't blame her."

"But you took the pills because you couldn't live with her?"

"No, I took them so I could go on turning up at the job every morning."

"But you can get pills for everything these days can't you? Even... well... you know? *That*."

I can't believe we're discussing erectile dysfunction. Have we no limits? I'm cringing with embarrassment. She's such a beautiful woman, surely it's obscene, or pathetic – I don't know which. "I'd prefer to wait for a woman who was as hot as hell, a woman I trusted with my life as well as my... thing... and just see what happens."

She smiles. "That's the spirit. It lets me out then."

"You mean miss skinny-arse-and-big-tits? Yes... sorry. That kind of physique just doesn't do it for me at all."

"Fat arse, Phil. I told you. *Fat* arse, and *no* tits."

"Oh? That changes things... that might just do it."

She gives me another playful tap, but then her face puckers. The next thing I know she's against me, and I'm enfolding her tiny frame while she sobs into my chest. I don't know how this has happened, nor what it is inside of me she feels so needful of, but she's a long while, long enough for me to have grown used to the feel of massaging her shoulders, the feel of her accepting comfort from me. And she feels exquisite in her need.

Finally she surfaces, like one coming up for air, and takes a deep breath, while slapping her behind.

"So,... you think my arse is skinny?"

"Adrienne, stop it. You're tying me in knots."

She wipes her eyes, and I realise my shirt is wet, that I can feel her wetness on my chest. "I know," she says. "I'm enjoying it." And then: "What about more of that rancid coffee then?"

"Sounds perfect. Actually, I think I'm getting used to the taste,

though we'll probably have stomach ache for days."

"Well, I'm okay. I can't possibly get worse stomach ache than I've already got."

"I know... let me fill that bottle for you."

How much longer can we go on doing this? Soon the sun will be up and we'll be leaving the island on the ebb tide. But I can't let her go. She embodies the most precious, the most beautiful, and surely the most meaningful encounter of my life – the way we talk, the depth of our connection, and all so natural, as if I've known her for centuries. I can't face her, later, in that café, because I'm a victim of my moods and I know I'll be too tongue tied, that I'll let the moment pass, and then I'll be spending the rest of my life thinking about her, wondering where she is and what she's doing – and cursing myself for a fool for being afraid to just,.... ask her.

So ask her now before it's too late.

"Adrienne. This is all amazing to me. Listen... afterwards... when we get off this island... do you think we could... maybe... sometime...."

No... I can't do it. I pause, blushing, a prickle of sweat breaking out on my brow. I take a breath and try again. "I mean..."

She looks, and in that look I see she knows what I'm driving at. She senses it in my bashfulness, and there's a tender reception, a sympathy, but still she shakes her head and cuts me down with a gentle slice of her hand. I was right. It will take an amazing kind of guy to be accepted as her partner after what she's been through, but clearly she's already decided I'm not him. It's far too soon to be thinking of that kind of thing anyway, her pain too fresh, too raw. And, since this is all the time we're going to have, this must be about something else. A brief connection, but an exchange of something more enduring. Something more important than our telephone numbers.

"Okay. Sorry."

Yes... I was seeking to make things ordinary between us. An ordinary life; a man a woman, and a bed. And after what we've shared, we can never be ordinary.

We're quiet for a while, and then as we sit down together at the kitchen table, I shake my head in dismay. "Sorry, Adrienne. I'm not usually such... an early revealer."

She leaps at the opportunity to clear the air, to move on. "You sure? Perhaps that's why you can't find a girlfriend."

It’s okay. I've not embarrassed her. Already there's another level we operate at, and she's keen to get us back there, accelerating us with the apparent lightness of her mood. I reciprocate, keen to get us back there myself, having momentarily stalled on my childish desire to possess her.

"There's nothing worse than a needy bloke, is there?"

"Or a needy woman." She gives me a mysterious smile, then sets about making coffee.

I'd begun that day confused in mind and spirit, also wasting the time of an uncommunicative, if heartbreakingly beautiful woman. I'd set out to view a house, and through the windows of that house hopefully spy a new landscape for my life to recover in, and hopefully finally work out what my purpose was – or if there was no purpose, at least make my peace with that too.

Now I'm sitting with her, drinking these peculiarly bitter grains, seeing her transformed and wise, and still longing for a way by which I could have her love me, but without my being overwhelmed by the desire to possess her – if such a love is even possible. I look across at her while she takes a sip, amazed by her beauty. And then: "They say you see your whole life again during an NDE. Kind of like a replay? Is it true?"

She's struck by the change of subject, glad for it too, and I'm glad she's glad because above all I want her to feel safe with me. I want her to trust I will never push her into a corner, that I will always provide a clear line of escape – even though that's how I've lost all my women.

She gathers her words, wondering how best to explain.

"How would you react," she says, "if you knew the people you were with knew what you were thinking?" She doesn't wait for me to answer. "More than that, how would you react to people if you knew what *they* were thinking – and not only thinking but also feeling, to the very depths of their soul? And that you knew, they knew, you knew."

"What? I'd probably never want to be near another person again. I'd have to live out here in isolation, away from everyone."

"Why? For fear of hurting people with your thoughts? Or fear of them hurting you with theirs?"

"Both, I think."

"Then you have two challenges, Phil. You need to learn openness. And you need to trust in your compassion for others.

Trust that if they take advantage of you on account of it, it's not your problem, its theirs."

"Says you who was afraid to phone the office this afternoon in case they thought you were an idiot."

"Good point, but that's different. I'm a slave to a corrupt system, as we all are. We all lie in order to eat. If there was another way to live, we'd do it, but there isn't." She gathers her hair behind her head, pulls it tight a while as if to steady her thoughts. "There's something else I've not told you, about the near death experience.

"Something happens. In a way you're right, it's like a valve opening, and you remember everything you've ever done in your life. *Your whole life*, in an instant. And it's not just everything you've ever done, but also everything you've ever felt, and more important than all of that, you also feel every emotion you've ever evoked in others – the happiness, the sadness, the love, the hate. You feel *their* emotion."

"Like a judgement, you mean?"

"There's no judgement. This is not religion. This is simply the way it is, whether we believe in it or not. I think it happens so we have a chance to learn by it, because I think in the world that's coming we'll communicate at an emotional level, without words –I mean there are so many different languages aren't there? You need something to act as a universal translator of human intent. It's our evolutionary destiny.

"Love, compassion, understanding, they embody true meaning, positive things, but possessed in abundance only by the more advanced beings among us. Mistrust, jealousy, hate and all those other distinctly negative traits – well, they make you think of the material world as a kind of pre-school, where babies go because they're not grown up enough to deal with reality as it truly is. They'd just end up breaking it.

"That's it, I think. We're living in a kind of existential pre-school. The world is predicated on a kind of slavery, one in which we're required to house and clothe and feed ourselves. And we'll tell our masters whatever we have to in order to survive. It's hard to grow up in a society that thrives on such emotional infancy. And we have to change it. One soul at a time. I think that's what it's all about.

"I may be hurting you now, but I wouldn't know how much, not yet anyway. I'll find out one day though. One day all things will be revealed. I'll know then if you're listening to me, and if I'm touching

you at a deeper level or... if you're just staring at my tits again."

The room by now is perfectly still. The softness of her voice has quelled it, like oil on water, hypnotised it into a highly focussed trance. And I can't say anything because I too am stilled, calm, trance-like. I am a lake at dawn, perfectly reflecting the sky and reluctant even to draw breath for fear of disturbing its eerily beautiful glassiness.

"So what are you thinking, Phil?"

"I can't tell you that. You'll have to wait until your next visit to the afterlife."

"No, tell me. Is it that you're afraid of hurting me that you don't want to say?"

What is this? How can we both be so unguarded? I sense danger in it and I want to withdraw, to become sober again, *yes sober,* for this is beginning to feel like drunkenness, but she's angled her nose at me, and she's demanding an answer. What can I say? "It's more selfish than that. But I can't tell you. We... we don't know each other well enough."

"So what's the problem? After tomorrow you'll never see me again. Why worry about hurting my feelings?"

It's true then; these coming hours are the last I'll ever have with Adrienne. Her escape from me is wide open, and she means to take it.

"You misunderstand. I'd never willingly hurt your feelings. I'm more afraid of your rejection. Afraid of hurting myself. Afraid of not seeing you after tomorrow, in fact, if you must know, I was going to ask you earlier if we could see each other again, but you stopped me because you read my mind."

"I know. But that was different, and it wasn't really what you wanted."

"It wasn't? So how come you can't read my mind now."

"Because now you're thinking with your heart, and not your head. Tell me what you're thinking, tell me what you're really feeling. Right now."

"No way."

"Tell me."

"Not a chance."

"Typical man... cowardly to the last."

"All right, I'm feeling that I want to sleep with you."

There – but she goaded me into it – and what's more she knew

what she was doing, indeed knew this is exactly what I was thinking. Even so, I'm worried I've been too honest now, but she doesn't flinch.

"That's more like it," she says. "And I'm guessing you don't mean sexually, do you?"

"Well, that would be impossible, wouldn't it? I'm impotent, and you've got your period. There could never be a less likely pair of lovers washing up together on a desert island."

She laughs. "True. Then how do you imagine it would be?"

"I just want to lie down, comfortably, against you. I don't want us to say anything. I don't want to fumble like a teenager with your bra-strap. I just want to go to sleep with my head against the soft pillow of your breast, listening to the beat of your heart. That's what I'm thinking and feeling right now, and before you go off on one, you did ask me to be honest."

She's hard to read again, her expression blank, inscrutable so it's impossible to know if this is anything more than an intellectual game to her. Then she gives me an encouraging smile, so I know at least I've not offended her, and that's enough for me. No damage done,... at least none that I can see.

"It would be so much easier!," she says. "If we could always say what we mean like that, up front, don't you think? Or if we didn't need to say it, that we could read each other's feelings in such fine detail."

"But so far it's a one way thing, Adrienne. I don't know how what I feel makes you feel. And that doesn't seem fair. Surely, this only works if I can feel your thoughts too. Or at least have you describe them to me. Is that not how it will work, in this world you say is coming?"

"Describe my thoughts? But words are so puny when it comes to feelings, aren't they? As a poet I should be able to do better. I should know all the ways to describe the infinite shades of grey from "yes I like", to "no I don't like". But the nearest I can get to it at the moment is to say... yes... I think I'm open to that."

"Open to what?"

"Have you forgotten already? To sleeping with you. Like that. Exactly like you said."

"I... I was only playing with you."

"You were?... well, if that's so, then fair enough. Otherwise fetch a blanket, and a pillow. Then come through to the lounge, and lie

with me 'till morning."

Chapter 20

Lovers

Why do I think I'm dreaming this? Is it because what I'm feeling is so ridiculously inflated I'm reminded of the dream, the dream in which I was already in love with Birdy? Because love is *love* in dreams, and impossibly intense, so intense a lover has only to smile to make even a middle aged and chronically impotent man think he's wet his pants?

I'm feeling all of that now as I sit beside her, dazed and trembling, even as I rest safe in the knowledge of my impotence, that it shall not ruin this experience. Still, I'm afraid of touching her, even as she looks at me expecting me perhaps to close up the gap between us. She's puzzled by my hesitation, perhaps thinking, like any man, I'd be slobbering all over her at the slightest invitation.

She raises a finger in warning. "No kissing," she says.

I nod in mute obedience; I'd never even thought of kissing.

She closes the gap herself, takes control of a situation I fear to control in case I ruin it. She slips her arms around me, dips her head to my chest, breathes me in, listens to my heart. The closeness of her is exquisite.

"You're nervous," she says.

An understatement. It might be dizziness or vertigo, I don't know, but I've no sense of up or down nor left nor right any more. I do not feel our descent onto those downy pillows, only her body, slight but vital, and the electric heat of her. We're side by side, she inclined a little her head above mine now, her arm around my shoulders so she can more easily draw me to her breast, and with me comes the blanket as she gently folds it over us.

There I expire in softness, in luxury and in the warm honey-scent of her. I think of the coin in my pocket, wonder if it carries two heads or one, but dare not check. Indeed, for now I don't care. Dream or reality, my surrender is absolute.

Perhaps she's not expected this, not expected such mute submission to warmth and care, and I fancy I hear an involuntary gasp escape her – feel it in the movement of her chest as my cheek finds the hollow between her breasts. Meanwhile her heart beats out the manic betrayal of her own nervousness.

"Adrienne?"

"Hush. We said no talking."

"But your heart's frantic."

"Can you blame it? You're the first man I've had near me since Chuck. Pay it no attention. What are you thinking now?"

"I thought we said no talking."

"Just tell me."

"Let's not play the thinking game. I'm sure to say the wrong thing and hurt you, and lose this moment."

I feel her stiffen a little. "You must risk telling me or lose it anyway."

I search my thoughts for something innocuous, but true. "I'm thinking your skin smells of honey."

"And do you like honey?"

"Yes... but it's not just that."

"Then what?"

"Your scent,... it makes me feel I can trust you."

"I'll never knowingly hurt you, Phil. You smell of coconut by the way."

"And can you trust it?"

"You're a man; I'd be a fool to trust you. But it's nice anyway."

This run of playful banter eases the nerves, the self-consciousness, and I hear her heart slowing, beating out a gentler rhythm, this heart that once stopped and had to be punched into going again by electric shocks so severe they had this slender, tender body leaping. I try to block out that image, and snuggle closer, breathing the scent of her skin and something from the dress, something not of Adrienne, something alien, yet significant in this moment I think, a catalyst. Lemons? Spices? Birdy... here? Yes. She's in the cushions of the sofa, pressed against my back, so I am sandwiched in tenderness, and so swept away with things now, I fear I might lose consciousness.

But then:

"Phil?"

"Hmm?"

"I think I can can feel something... moving. Down there."

I'm aware of it too. It surprises me and I jerk away from her, embarrassed. "Hell! I'm sorry. I... wasn't expecting that."

She thinks for a moment, then closes up the gap. "It's all right," she says. Birdy? Or was it Adrienne who spoke? They both sound

very much alike.

"No, I'm sorry. Honestly, that's the first time, in ages,..."

"Don't worry. But it's good, isn't it?"

"I suppose so. Yes."

Silence... but not a peaceful one. My own heart is wrecking itself now, and I'm aware it must be bouncing off Adrienne's ribs, sending shock waves deep inside of her. And she's thinking... thinking something so dangerous I'm on my guard before even she's spoken.

"Phil?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you think you might be able to..." she rolls her eyes. "*You know*?"

"What? I don't know. I doubt it. Pay it no attention. We'd better..."

Stop, I was thinking. We'd better stop.

I make to untangle myself, but then her hand is on my chest, reassuring. "It's okay. You've nothing to prove to me. But... might it not be worth a try?"

"But... your period... and... I don't have any... you know?..."

"It's all right. I mean, if you don't want to... but... we can do it another way."

Surely I've misunderstood this. I think back to that awkward drive over here yesterday, and cannot make the leap from that to... this. The gap is too wide. What's happened to us?

"I'm fine," I tell her. "Maybe this was a mistake."

But she counters with an unambiguous fingertip which she runs speculatively along my waistband. "Are you sure? I'd be very happy to do that for you, if you'd like me to."

"No. I really don't want you to do that."

"You don't?"

Who am I kidding? Of course I want it. She feels like heaven against me, and there's no reason why we shouldn't. But still, I'm bewildered, thinking to myself I don't know how it came to this.

"It's just... I don't want it to mean nothing," I tell her. "I mean like you were just testing the plumbing."

Did I really just say that? I can hear myself saying it, so I suppose I must have, but it's like my real self is somewhere else, viewing all of this in the third person. She laughs and the rhythm of her heart steps up a notch, steady, insistent. She wants to. I can feel it in her. I see a side of her now I've not suspected, that of a woman

who knows what she wants and would never be shy of telling a man, of demanding it of him.

Yes, I'm thinking. Do it, Adrienne. DO IT!

If only things could be so simple!

She snuggles a little closer. "The first time might be... I don't know... what's the right word... speculative?" she says. "The second... who knows?"

Is she saying this is the start of a relationship? But only minutes ago we were ruling that out. I don't have time to think it through, for already she's slipped her hand in my pocket, found the tip of my sex and begun pinching it between her forefinger and thumb. Yes... she's a confident and experienced lover.

"Why not slip off your trousers? You can't be comfortable sleeping in them. Your shirt too, or it'll be all crumpled in the morning. And we might spoil it. I'd... better take this dress off too. Do you mind?"

Do I mind?

My mouth runs dry and my tongue glues itself to my teeth so I can't speak. Is it really just the mess of sex, she's thinking of? I'm not anticipating much, a few anaemic blobs at the most, but I can hardly tell her that. I nod weakly, certain it's all going to be ruined anyway, that ten minutes from now she'll be giving up on me with an aching arm and an awkward smile.

She sits up and peels the dress over her head then watches while I undress, unblinking, uncritical, encouraging, and I appreciate it. It makes me feel mature enough to go along for a while, but I know I can't maintain it for ever. At some point this weirdly easy pragmatism will turn to sex with all its usual expectations, and then I'll deflate, because when the world makes demands of me I seek only to withdraw from it.

And then she atop, my sex is stretched against the smooth vee of her pants, while her hands play me like an instrument, and she a skilled courtesan. Her breasts are rising, bobbing gently in sympathy with the jingle of her pendants, a soft, jingling rhythm. Not hers, she said. Birdy, Bridy, Brigidh. Her sister. Long dead but with us now.

Adrienne Divine, a woman who just happens to have the most magical hands of any woman I've ever known. And she's smiling – smiling now like she knows she's in control, knows I cannot help but climax for her, though I'd thought myself spent and wasted for

so long. And I'm thinking she's right, that I can do this, that I can do it for her, Adrienne atop me and looking at the same time so tender and so sexy.

She slows the motion of her hands, leans a little further back, shakes out her hair and enjoys my expression as I fear she's about to give up on me. But then she deepens rhythm and I feel a part of myself rising to meet the sun, and the light spreading, casting out the shadows that have clouded my vision for years, and years and years.

"I'll take it," she says.

"What? Take what?"

"Your number, when you offer it to me later. If you still want to. You still want to... don't you?"

"Yes... yes... yes"

"And I'll take you, Philip Arthur Sampson. I'll take you so deep... ooops!!!"

She laughs tenderly. "Sorry, I was trying to draw you out a bit longer. Now... there you see? You seem in perfect working order to me. Just lie back. I have a piece of tissue in my bag."

Tears aren't my usual response. But I'm sobbing when she returns, sobbing as she mops me up and folds me back into her bosom. Then she folds the blanket over us once more, sends me off into darkness and to dreams. Adrienne! I feel clean, and healed, and not just because she's released something long locked inside of me, but because she was tender, and because now as I lay against her, she's rocking me gently and calling me her darling man.

But still... still, it troubles me we are not ourselves in this. There's something drunken about us. I can't imagine what's brought about this turn. Is it the night? The storm? The presence of Birdy acting as a strange catalyst from the other side?

Or is it something a little more prosaic?

Chapter 21

Stoned

I dream of that Volkswagen camper again. It sounds like it's outside the door. There are faces, and I try to focus on them, but they turn to smoke and drift away. Then I'm shifting in and out of lucidity, and while still in the dream, I'm thinking of those three days tossed upon the ocean, two of unceasing storm from which I'd sheltered, psychically, in a nether realm, and one of calm, for which I'd prayed and been granted deliverance. It was on the third day, when the sun had climbed into a butter-coloured dawn I'd known I'd survive, but by that time I'd stretched the boundaries of my existence into something sublime, something beyond the physical.

Yet it was here, safely returned to the physical plane, and after long years of wilderness, I met a woman, listened to her tales of travel to extraordinary places, and saw her transformed in a matter of hours from a frosty stranger to an uncompromising lover, a lover who'd teased me out of debilitating impotence, with a mixture of humour and tenderness. And so doing, she rendered herself at once the most important person in my life, the most important person I'd *ever had* in my life.

But how could any of it be true?

I hear the engine of that old VW again! The clattering, metallic run of it. Nostalgia. Something lost. Innocence. Love. Cornwall, with my father, touring an imagined Summerland - that sound forever in our ears as we make our way along deep-cut lanes to secret beaches of golden sand, and shimmering sea! An overwhelming security of love.

Please God don't let me wake and discover I've dreamed it!

Dreamed what?

Me and Adrienne!

The dream holds on, teases me, puts me back to sea again, tossed in that rubber boat, and its the morning of the third day. The waves are still high, still a tremendous, giddying swell to them, but the motion isn't as chaotic. I'm roused by the more predictable motion of the boat sufficient to raise my head above the gunwale. Gramps is no longer with me. The dawn is bleeding, a blood red sky, the sea churning, streaked with a criss-crossed net of foam, and suddenly looming over me is the rusting hulk of a steel freight

container, lost overboard in the never-never, and now spilling from a wave above, and bearing down with a terrifying trajectory. I'd dared to think my luck was in, but it appears to have run out and after all of this, all they're going to find of me are the tattered remains of a rubber boat, as if it's been run over by a train.

Then I'm waking with a jolt upon the sofa, stifling a cry of alarm. I'm naked under a warm blanket – always a good sign. Dawn is pressing against the curtains. Adrienne is no longer with me, which raises a flutter of panic but I make her out, curled upon the chair across from me, her legs tucked beneath her. She's put the dress back on, though it's slipped off her shoulder, baring a single, pointed porcelain breast. On her face is a look of perfect repose, on the carpet by her loosely draped hand, lies the sketch I made of her last night.

She's been looking at it.

The memories return me safe now, deliver me from the sea, and I move, rising from the surf of my dreams, easing the stiffness from my bones. Then I pull on my clothes, cross to where she lies and carefully lift the strap of the dress, so it covers her. I catch that scent again, that strangely potent yet ever so subtle catalyst – honey – and I wonder what it would be like to kiss her, to feel her melt in my arms.

But did I dream it?

No.

Unlikely as it still seems to me – the crusty deposit on my stomach reassures me what happened between us was real. I smile at the memory. It fills me with a sense of purpose, a fresh wind filling my sails – and I want it to take me places. With her. I can hardly believe it! My life is beginning anew, and this woman has gifted me the energy to see it through.

She draws out a long ragged breath as she wakes, then holds it. I'm waiting for the out-breath, but it doesn't come. It's as if her thoughts take precedence, and have yet to allow it.

"Phil?"

"Over here."

I'm by the curtains, looking out now – a safe distance. Give her space. How will she be? Will it still be something she was open to, as she put it last night, or will she wonder what had happened? Will she close herself off?

Don't think like that now; I couldn't bear it!

"Morning already?" she asks. There's something defensive in her tone, something light, but false. It has me bracing myself for the worst.

"Yes, the storm's passed. It's a beautiful day."

She's sitting up now, untangling her hair with her fingers. Is it my imagination or does it seem even redder this morning? Now she's shaking it out. It's magnificent! She pulls a face.

"I've got the most awful taste in my mouth. You don't think there's something funny about that coffee do you?"

"You mean apart from it being off? I don't think so. Do you feel all right?"

"Yes... starving though."

"I know. Me too."

Then comes the look: "Phil?"

"Hmm?"

She's shaking her head. "We *didn't*, did we?"

My heart sinks. She doesn't remember? How can she not remember? We were both stone cold sober. Or were we? "Well, yes... we did."

She looks away, eyes popping with... something – surprise, horror... what?

"Oh..." She puts a hand to her brow as she dredges the memory back, as if from the murky depths of a hangover. "We did?"

"Are things really so hazy?"

She graces me with a weak smile. "Sorry. It feels like I'm looking back on it through a fog. But... it was me! I seduced you. I... this is awful. I'm so sorry, Phil. What must you think of me?"

"Don't be sorry. It was,... wonderful. You were wonderful. I... didn't take much seducing."

She covers her ears – no, she doesn't want to hear this. She's not ready. Her life is upside down, and the last thing she wants is a lover. "But I wasn't myself," she says. "There must be something in the coffee! There must! All this talk, Phil. Talk, talk, talk. And then... last night! No way. Oh,... *shit!*"

She's upset. Embarrassed. Perhaps even ashamed, and that shames me. My heart plummets. It's the worst possible outcome.

"Promise me we'll not talk about it," she says. "Please – let's just forget it ever happened."

I feel the inevitable downwards tug into disappointment. "Okay."

I'd wanted to spend the rest of my life with her, talking about

nothing else. But as usual that's just me, taking everything too seriously.

I realise now it's nothing more than that moment, the moment of the morning after the night before, when opportunist lovers wake in the same bed and remember nothing, or if they do, they fear the other waking and then having to speak to them, to be,... nice.

Ugh!

Usually one or the other sneaks away in the small hours, hopefully never to meet again. Those are the rules of the one-nighter, and anything else would be crass. But that's not possible here. It was never going to be like that between us. But whatever the truth of things right now, I can see she needs a little space.

"I'll... just go and wash," I tell her.

She nods, grateful I think for the time to think. Then, eyes wide, she gazes at me. I feel close to tears, to have come so near to such an extraordinary beauty and now to doubt I shall ever know its like again – how am I supposed to feel? Or perhaps I should be thinking it makes no difference. Perhaps I should be thinking the important thing is I'm no longer impotent, no longer afraid to make love to a woman. I could go out tonight, prowl the clubs in Manchester, find myself a willing girl, confident I can pleasure myself with her until I burst.

But I only want Adrienne!

The water is shockingly cold. It makes me gasp as I splash it on my chest. It wakes me, brings me back a little more to my senses. I don't know what's happened here any more than Adrienne. I should have been more sensitive, more forward thinking but, like her, I'd felt carried away on something – not quite myself, as if possessed, bewitched.

Brigid? Birdy? What was that about? I remember that feeling of laying back in Birdy's lap, like that time in the dream, in the camper van, up by the castle – her hands stroking my face, giving me a delirious kind of comfort while Adrienne went to work elsewhere.

And Adrienne behaved as women do in men's dreams, not in real life. The memory of it seems preposterous now and not a little indecent, as if we had indeed been under the influence of something mind altering, something that had eroded all our natural inhibitions. And she's right – all that talking, and so intimate. Strangers don't talk like that. It's like we came together from some past life, already familiar with each other and we were just picking

up the threads.

But it's done, and I'm glad for it. Now all I've got to do is reassure her how very much I respect her, *and want to be with her.*

She's in the kitchen when I come down. She's changed back into her suit, and brushed out her hair, tried to restore herself to prim perfection, but her hair is still flame red and speaks of another side to her, a side she's been revealing by degrees since yesterday. There's no going back on that, no squeezing it once more into the box. We're neither of us the same people who crossed that causeway before the tide came in.

She's tipped out the coffee jar, spread the grains on a dinner plate and is running her fingers through them, like she's reading their traces. She looks up at me, her face set, serious. "There's something here. Some kind of powder, or crystals or something."

"Are you sure?"

I peer at it. She's right. The grains are picking up a pale dust which settles out an off-white colour, like cornflour. What is it? Some kind of narcotic? And if it is, what does it mean? Does it mean everything we said, all those unguarded moments, those confessions, that delightfully unexpected intimacy, culminating in last night's extraordinary lovemaking – that it doesn't count, because we were not ourselves? Is the whole weekend, the whole of our time spent here to be written off as an aberration because we were... we were...

...fucking *stoned*?

I can't take this in. "Amelia laced her Nescafe with cocaine? No way! Just think what we're saying here, Adrienne!"

"I'm sorry Phil. I don't know if it's cocaine – I don't even know what that looks like. But there's definitely something in here that shouldn't be. You can see it yourself. It might explain that bitter taste. Do you feel all right?"

"Never better... what about you?"

"I feel dreadful. I've not only stranded you here, I've been feeding us both class A drugs and... I've... I've taken advantage you. That's definitely out of character."

"I don't remember objecting very much. As for the drugs, we don't know that for sure. Anyway, I thought you snorted cocaine. I'm not even sure you can take it like that – I mean, in your coffee can you?"

"Why are you looking at me? I've never taken that stuff in my

life. How the hell would I know? And it might not be cocaine. I'm just guessing. It might be LSD or magic mushrooms, or one of those weird designer drugs they're always on about these days. I've no idea."

"Okay, let's not get carried away. Could it not just be creamer or something?" I run my fingertip into the powder and make to touch it to the tip of my tongue like I've seen them do in crime dramas, but she slaps it away.

"Don't," she says. "The coffee's been coming out black. Whatever it is dissolves colourless, so it can't be creamer, can it?"

"I suppose not. Sugar then?"

"It's not sugar, Phil. I know what sugar looks like, and it doesn't look like this. It's also strange sugar that makes the brew so bitter. Perhaps we should go to the hospital."

"What? No... give it a couple of days. Let's see how we feel. If it was in any way poisonous we would have been ill by now. And like I said, I feel great!."

She gives a sarcastic laugh. "That's because you're a man, and you had me dry humping you last night."

"Adrienne... please!"

She looks contrite, catches my arm briefly and presses it. "Sorry... that was cheap. Really. Forgive me? But you know what I mean."

That I'm still riding a post-coital high? Sure, I know what she means, but she doesn't get it. She's clearly no idea what last night meant to me, and it worries me now that to even try to explain it would frighten her, and ruin things even more.

"It might be sweetener that's gone off with damp or mould or something." But I'm really clutching at straws now, and equally, I feel she doesn't want to be persuaded last night was exactly what it seemed to be. She'd rather have the excuse, that we were simply off our heads, that making love was insane, that her tenderness and understanding, even her curing of me, all of it, had been a terrible mistake.

She sweeps the grains back into the jar. "Whatever it is, there's nothing we can do about it now. We'd better tidy up."

She's saying our time is coming to an end. I can feel her thoughts moving on, moving to the future, to the mainland, and to what comes next. And I'm not getting the feeling I feature very large in her future any more. She's too embarrassed, and I was never any

good with one night stands – I could never sneak away in the morning. I was always there when they woke, all puppy eyed and bearing coffee, and wanting to know what came next. I couldn't see that for them the magic of the night had gone, that the morning brought back the colder reality. And the emotional rejection I used to feel, at the look in their eyes I'm feeling now, only it's much, much worse, for I truly thought I had found my soul-mate in this woman.

"Adrienne... it doesn't make any difference, does it?"

"What?"

"That we might have been off our heads."

I know it's unkind of me to be making her think about this, but I can't dismiss it.

"I don't know Phil." She smiles as if at the memory, and I'm heartened by it because she does not seem altogether repulsed. She holds my arm once more, gives a gentle squeeze and tugs upon it. "I remember you came so sweetly. And then you cried beautifully."

"Thanks for reminding me of that. It's not my usual reaction."

"Don't be ashamed. Maybe it's as well we were stoned. We could never have been like that sober."

"I just thought I'd never be able to do it again."

"Well clearly you can. Obviously you just need to get stoned more often."

She's rising from the table now, stemming off further enquiry. There'll be no getting at this. She's telling me it's time to go. But that can’t be right, can it?

Chapter 22

Birdy's warning

There's not much to tidy. A few cups to rinse, the hearth to sweep, the pillows and the blanket to return to the bedroom. Then there's the yellow dress to be hung back in the wardrobe. By our calculations the tide is peaking around now, low water is still hours away – some time around midday – so our urgency is false. We have hours, and could easily linger over this, but something is driving us from the house. Guilt perhaps, and mutual embarrassment.

Then I'm stepping out into sunshine, and she's pulling the door closed behind us. I'm wearing the tie, my collar fastened, like I'm setting out to the office, and I realise I've buttoned myself up as tightly as she, lost the mystic in me, and she the witch – both of them abandoned and bewildered, gazing after our departure in disbelief.

What is it we're afraid of here? We made love, of a fashion, and so what? This is the twenty first century. People tumble into bed and exchange body fluids at the drop of a hat – not even a spoken word, just an eyebrow raised in query, followed by a nodded assent. By those standards what we did last night was staid. Had there not been a growing pleasantness between us? No... it was more than that,... we'd *connected*, shared things... deeply. We can go on from here, be friends at least. If only she'd allow it.

I take a breath and lift my eyes to the sea. To my dismay the tide is already out, the causeway clear, and what was yesterday a plane of churning foam-specked grey is now restored to sand and mud.

Crap!

We'll be back on the mainland in a matter of minutes.

"Is it going out already?" she asks.

"I... I don't know. It's surely too late for it to still be coming in? I wish we had some tables... or we could get some tide times..."

"It looks okay to me."

Adrienne's smiling, and why wouldn't she be? The nightmare is nearly over. The end is in sight. All she has to do is drive me back to the office, laugh off her experience with her colleagues and have her life back to normal. Except... she doesn't want that! She thinks

kindly of me. I know she does. So what is it that forces us to wear fixed grins and lie to ourselves this way.

"Shall we?" she says.

Shall we what? Oh,... she means shall we go.

Can it be true? She wants to pretend it never happened? And why? Is it simply because it's confusing and complicated, and her life's confusing and complicated enough? The last thing she wants is to linger in this place, this pool of possibility, to have more time to think, to talk – because when we talk strange things happen.

That's surely it. She's just afraid.

The sea looks close to the causeway to me, but if the tide is going out this is not a problem. The causeway looks wet, as if the sea has just uncovered it, which supports this hypothesis, but on the other hand it's rained heavily all night, so it's possible appearances are deceiving us, that the tide is coming in and just about to lap against that pitted run of concrete. I wish we had more information. By my calculations, the tide should still be in, but I don't know this stretch of coastline. The moon is close to full which means higher tides, and more energetic ones across coastal flats like this. I'm confused, but Adrienne has already decided it's okay and she's more local to this area than me, and the crossing only takes a couple of minutes, so we should be okay.

"All right, let's go."

She looks at me then, reads me, detects the disappointment in my tone and I think she understands. "I'm sorry, Phil. I've hurt you haven't I?"

"No, you've healed me, Adrienne. And for that I'll always be grateful. But in the spirit of last night's openness, you should know the thought of losing you now, losing you back into the world, leaves me feeling empty and alone."

She looks away. Too much, Phil – declaring yourself that way. What do you expect her to say?

"Why me? Why does it have to be me?"

"Because I think that's what alchemy is. To begin with we're all of us empty, all of us disconnected from the soul of the world, billions of us, and we've each got to find a way of reconnecting, find a way of entering into a personal relationship with it – through art, poetry, literature... witchcraft... worship... dreams,... or just... being with someone who seems to fit your soul so well as I feel you fit mine."

This sounds too sentimental, like a puppy whining when it sniffs out its imminent abandonment. I cringe at myself. There's nothing more pathetic than emotional blackmail, nothing more despicable in the armoury of a spurned lover. "I'm sorry. Take no notice." I try a bit of dismissive and self-deprecating laughter. "I'll get over it."

But rather than letting me go, letting me retreat safe inside myself now, she turns and follows me in for a moment. "I'm not insensitive to any of this, you know?"

"I know. But you're also much stronger than me. You also have the finesse to value what's happened here for its transient nature, and you can let it go before we wear it out or reveal its flaws. Me? I don't feel I've finished exploring it yet. But that's me all over – always wearing a thing out, instead of learning to move on."

She listens in silence, and I don't know how much of it she's taking in, or if she's thinking I'm just sentimental fool. There's something gentle in the way she touches my arm though. "Come on," she says. "Let me buy you breakfast by way of apology."

"Apology?"

"For stranding you here and ruining your weekend."

It's been the most remarkable few days of my life and she knows it, and yes, I know she's also afraid of that.

By now the sun has warmed the inside of the car, releasing the odour of its newness, but I realise, as I settle in and fasten my belt, there's something else. There's an unfamiliar sharpness to it which puts me in mind of the interior of the helicopter that morning before we flew out to the rig. It had a similar sort of perfume, a scent I can't help but associating now with danger.

I feel myself stiffening as she drives us down the lane. I can't think what it is, other than my disappointment and my fear of losing her back to the chaos of the mainland.

"You're quiet, Phil. Say something, will you? You talk so much, it's almost painful when you stop."

"I'm all right. Can I still... give you my number?"

"Of course you can."

"And is there any chance you'll use it, do you think?"

"I can't make any promises. You know how complicated my life is right now."

Yes. She's yet to make the leap from considering a relationship with me to be just another complication in her life, to being the one thing that would help her transcend everything else. That's the

difference between us. For me, she would not just be another part of my life, she would *become* my life, and the rest, all the rancid crap would be jettisoned. If that's the way it is with her then perhaps it's better we part, better I never see her again because it's not my place to persuade her. At our time of life, and in our circumstances, we must connect deeply, perfectly, profoundly, both of us, or not at all. I thought we had, but it turns out it was just something in the coffee.

"I know things are tough for you," I tell her. "I just want you to know I'd like to be there if you need someone – even if it's just to talk on the phone, talk nonsense like we seem to have done all weekend, or exchange texts..."

"You're sweet, Phil. Thank you." She chuckles. "Actually, that sounds nice. We have talked some rubbish, haven't we?"

"We certainly have."

I don't mean this. Everything I've said has been from the heart, though admittedly also sometimes off the top of my head. I'm just afraid of parting from her, as if in parting we'll be changed, zipped up, made stiff and cold and rational again. And I'm afraid too that she'll never call. But there's still breakfast, and we can build a relationship by text. Even in the brevity imposed by a hundred and sixty characters, I can trigger in her the sweet spots I now know are there. We can meet up now and then, see how things grow.

Give her space, Phil. Be positive. It'll be all right.

We're passing the cabins, close to the shore, the potholed mess of the causeway stretching out across the puddled sands, inviting us to cross. But that feeling's back and there's something else... a premonition of something. I catch a whiff of lemon. Birdy? Yes, imagination puts her on the back seat, leaning forward, languorously, her chin resting on my shoulder. What does she mean by this?

"Adrienne, slow down a little, will you?"

"I'm barely doing twenty as it is. Relax. Close your eyes if it helps. We'll be across in a minute. I'll tell you when you can open them."

We come down to the causeway. It's strewn with uprooted seaweed from the storm, the mirror of the sea to the right of it, glutinous mudflats to the left. It looks crossable, but Birdy's hand's squeezing my shoulder and it chills me. She's urging what? Go faster? No...

"STOP!"

Adrienne pulls up in alarm and looks at me, puzzled, while I look out across the causeway to the outcrop of Refuge Crag. Is it just my fears getting the better of me, my fear of the sea? *What is it, Birdy? What is this?* And while I'm looking for my answer, a tidal bore comes in like yesterday, a long line of white horses galloping by as once again the sea closes over the causeway, cutting us off.

Adrienne stares at it in disbelief. "It's coming *in*?"

It can't be! "I don't understand. It should be going out by now."

"That's another six hours we'll have to wait!"

I don't know which is the more disturbing – that we were nearly drowned or that I was saved by a voice in my head. If we'd been a second or two sooner, we would be in the water now, struggling to get out of a submerged car. I swallow this feeling down, but it'll be back to haunt me soon. Then I'll get the shivers and I'll have to take myself off somewhere quiet. Right now, as insane as it sounds, I'm focussing on the positive – the fact that I have a bit more time with Adrienne.

"That was close," she says. "We were nearly a statistic!" She shakes her head, her face crinkled into a snarl. "I hate this fucking place. I HATE IT! You must never buy the house. Promise me? It's deadly. How can anyone live out here? I'll never visit you out here. NEVER. NEVER. NEVER. Do you hear me?"

"All right, I know... but we're just hungry, tired."

Wait, she was thinking she might *visit* me?

"And I'm fucking ANGRY!!!." She thumps the horn in protest and the car gives out an alarming hoot that jolts us both, but the sea swallows it down impassively, like its nothing. "Sorry. I didn't realise it was as loud as that."

She laughs, thinks."Maybe there's some food up at the house - some tinned stuff we can use. I'm sorry but I'm really starving, Phil. Do you think Amelia will mind if we have a rummage?"

"I was just thinking the same thing. I'm sure she'll be fine with it. There might also be something edible in those cabins back there?"

"Just tins of paint and broken lobster pots I imagine." She shrugs. "Worth a look though while we're here, I suppose." and then: "Phil?"

"Hm?"

"How did you know?"

"Know what?"

"Don't give me that... you knew the bore was coming in."

"I... I just caught a glimpse out the corner of my eye, that's all."

"I didn't see anything. My eyes must be getting worse. I'm sorry. I'm going to be blind at this rate. No use to anyone."

But I don't want her worrying about her eyes, or taking the blame for this. She's too ready to assume guilt. "Like I said... it was just a glimpse."

"We would have drowned. And it would have been my stupid fault."

"But we weren't, and that's that. And will you please stop blaming yourself for every little thing that goes wrong?"

"Little? How can you be so calm? I thought drowning was your worst fear, and the sea – you're afraid of the sea. And it would have been my fault."

"It *wasn't* your fault. All right, I lied. I didn't see anything either. It was just an irrational feeing."

"Really? Then someone's looking after you. Is it Gramps do you think?"

"Maybe."

"I couldn't borrow him, could I? I could use a protective daemon like that."

"You have Birdy."

"Yes, but she's fickle and like I said, she always did have a liking for the men in my life. I think she's abandoned me for you."

"Em... well, I'll put in a good word for you. Now, let's have a quick look in those cabins, shall we?"

I'm not so calm as she thinks. My hands would be shaking now except I've pushed them into my pockets. The bore was easily the height of the car, and with the currents behind it, I imagine the car would have been swept from the causeway, overturned, and us tumbling about inside – a nightmare to contemplate. Except here we are, stepping out into life once more – the air is fresh, warm, salty, and the sea washes by with a rhythm that does not speak of danger or drowning. It's idyllic, peaceful, but Adrienne has learned to hate it. And I'm puzzled that this old fear of mine, a fear of the sea should have us cornered like this and will not let us go.

"You were right," I tell her.

"Right?"

"You said we wouldn't get off this morning, and we didn't."

"I know." Her tummy growls. She closes her eyes and rests her

hand upon it. "Sorry, but I really need to eat something."

The first of the cabins has a lock on it that looks like it'll need dynamite to shift. I peer through a crack in the badly fitting door and see the bright orange bows of a semi-rigid inflatable.

I feel Adrienne's breath curling up my neck as she tries to peer over my shoulder."What is it?"

"Boat."

She laughs. "Fine pair of castaways we are! We've even got a boat and we're still struggling to escape."

The second cabin is by contrast bound with a flimsy twist of wire which I manage to open without much effort. The doors shudder aside and we walk in. It's like an Aladdin's cave of detritus. There are cardboard boxes, piled waist high, along with pots of petrified paint and busted lobster pots, like she predicted. Also a couple of old bicycles, and mountains of newspapers, their headlines jogging my memory of world events going back decades.

It's like stepping inside a time machine, but I realise not one of those events has made any difference at all to my life, other than to provoke a negative response in me, to play upon the darker side of my imagination: storm clouds of sadness, anger and despair: *Local man in drugs probe. Teenage thug shoots cat. Hero Mum dies of Cancer. Exposed: Vicar head of Paedophile Ring.*

"Phil?"

"Just look at this stuff."

"What about it?"

"We're awash in crap. Our streets are not safe to walk upon, our hospitals filthy and underfunded, our politicians pathologically corrupt, our youth dumbed down, and all our heroes unmasked as bogey men. There is no hope, no love, no succour, at least not according to the Fourth Estate."

"What are you talking about? Don't go all dark on me. Come on, we're looking for food, remember?"

"But we're fed this stuff all the time."

"So stop buying newspapers. You're right, it's crap, but is any of it real? Anyway, I wasn't meaning that kind of nourishment. Look, I know you're a mystic, but you need to pick your moments and this isn't the time for philosophical ramblings – we did all that last night and look where it got us."

I spot an incongruous old porn magazine and a copy of the Economist, resting one atop the other on a makeshift trestle table.

The latter's cover bears an image of the familiar downward plunging line of the world's stock markets, while the former bears the overinflated chest of a very unladylike lady pouting comically. They seem unlikely bedfellows, except both, I note are depictions of a world based on deluded values.

Is this it? Is this all we amount to? Is this all we can point to as our emotional heritage? And if we truly are so childish, where then are the adults to guide us?

Gramps? Why didn't you warn me about the tide? Why leave it to Birdy?

Adrienne doesn't hold out much hope of finding anything. She lingers in the doorway, arms folded, her expression stiff, while I rummage half-heartedly in the boxes. For want of something to distract herself she takes up the porn mag and begins leafing through it, though I suppose she doesn't know what she's looking at.

"Searching for inspiration?" I ask.

She blinks, realises it's not a celebrity gossip magazine, then gives me a narrow smile and tosses the magazine down. "You wish."

"You'll find nothing in there that can titillate me, I'm afraid."

"Oh really?" She picks it up again and flashes me the centrefold, a pair of buxom wenches going at it doggie style with the aid of a rubber willy.

"Nope... leaves me cold. Ughhh. I hope they washed that thing before they used it."

She casts it aside, not entirely convinced. "Well, you seemed in perfect working order last night. I hope you're not suffering a relapse already."

"Well, what if I am? Who cares?"

"You do, but I wouldn't worry, you'll be okay. Men are all the same. Like riding a bike."

"Oh really? Well, women are all the same too."

"And what do you mean by that?"

"You assume all men are shallow arseholes, only after one thing. But we're not."

"Then... at the risk of getting more than I bargained for, what are you after?"

"Same as women – security in love. It's just that we don't always take it quietly when we're denied it."

She's about to respond, but pauses, rethinks, puzzled. "Are we having a tiff?"

I laugh. "Yes... yes we are."

She blinks looks away demurely. "Oh, that's bad. It means we're no longer strangers."

"Lovers then?" I ask.

"Don't push your luck." She smiles. "But if it's any comfort, I don't think you're a shallow arsehole."

"Okay, I'll take what small comfort I can get." I pull a box down from a shelf, hear the rattle of tins.

"You've found something?"

There's a wealth of tinned provisions - grapefruit, potatoes, carrots, meat, beans, corned beef, spam... tuna-fish. With luck all we need is one good meal of out it, and we can cross with the next low tide.

"Check the sell-by dates," she tells me. "We don't want food poisoning on top of everything else."

"They're all okay."

"All right then, but I'm not drinking any more of that coffee."

"No need... look, there are some tea-bags here. And powdered milk. And a fresh bag of sugar."

She gives a sarcastic sneer. "It's turning out to be our lucky day then, isn't it?"

But I can see she's feeling lighter, the colour returning, restoring her from ghastly white to her merely normal ghostly pale self. She casts her eyes once more over the newspaper headlines, picks one up at random. *Psycho stabs girl in park*. "I remember this," she says. "A random thing, a once in half a century thing, but no one walks through that park any more. We retreat from our fears, and all of them imagined." She gives a shudder. "Let's not go back. I don't think I could bear it."

"Back to house?"

"No, to the mainland. Let's stay here."

"As tempting an idea as that is, Ms Divine, we'll have to go back some time. This tinned stuff won't last for ever."

"Who cares?"

"Starve to death, you mean?"

"Why not? We both know there's something better than this."

I look at her in disbelief, then choose my next words very carefully. "Well, if I thought there was a chance of hooking up with you on the other side, I'd be tempted. But no, Adrienne. It would be no different. We'd just end up creating the same old world we know

and hate."

"No we wouldn't. *We* wouldn't Phil."

"Yes, we would." I kneel down and pick up another soiled newspaper. *Woman Politician has sex with Cop*. "You said yourself, that place you went to, it was somewhere you remembered fondly."

"Cephalonica? Yes, Chuck and I went on honeymoon."

"Then who's to say we aren't making this up as well? There are so many demons inside of us so many things we're afraid of, and I see them all written here." I hold up the front page for Adrienne to see. "This woman was just looking for happiness. It's only our narrow mindedness that soils it. *We* make it dirty. *We* make the world a dirty place."

"So we should walk around with a stupid grin on our faces all the time?"

"Why not? I thought that was the message of all NDE's. Think good things, do good things to others, love them, protect them – even your worst enemy. You should be telling me this. Why aren't you telling me this?"

"Because..."

"Because?"

"Because in case you hadn't noticed, at the bottom of me, a good half of me's afraid to believe in it."

"Why? In case you're wrong? In case you're just like the doctors would say if you admitted any of this to them? That you're crazy?"

"I just don't know what to trust in, Phil. I don't know what's real."

"What's real is what works, Adrienne. Just find what works for you, and learn to trust it."

Am I really saying this? Do I even know what those words mean?

I'm quiet as we return to the house, my jitters over our near miss still catching up with me. Adrienne drives slowly, still mulling things over. I take a coin from my pocket and look at it: Heads. Then turn it over: Tails. But how can any of this be real? Maybe I'm just hungry or dehydrated, or suffering from some weird withdrawal symptoms after Amelia's narcotic flavoured coffee.

"You okay, Phil?"

"Just wondering."

"Oh?"

"About the possibility we might actually be dead already, that

we'll never leave Leven Isle without a mystical kind of key, that it's our purgatory, that our eventual escape will be into a more reasoned Summerland where we can finally relax into our dreams – you with your father and Birdy, and me... well, with whatever turns me on." Then I ask her if she's ever wondered if in reality she never woke up from her coma, as I've begun wondering if I was never pulled from the sea – that like in my dream, my life-raft was hit by a freight container on the third day, and the only reason I appear to be alive, is because I'm actually... dead.

"It's me isn't it?" she says. "I've infected you with a death-wish." She shakes her head. "I didn't mean any of it. I was just blowing off steam. I'm glad I'm not dead. Really."

"But how would we know? I mean, from what you said, it was pretty real."

"Yes, we seem to be able to make it that way. More real than real, I'd say. But stub your toe, or trap your fingernail in the car door and you'll know if things are real or not. All right? Take no notice of what I said. Since the accident I'm so full of shit, I can't believe half the things I come out with. Nor can anyone else, and that's why I got sacked from the University. That's why I'm fading away to rags on a fraction of the salary I used to earn."

Arriving outside the house, she looks at me tenderly, tells me we'll both feel better when we've eaten, that so far as she knows the dead have no fear of pain, nor fainting from hunger, nor any use for food other than force of habit, and that this alone should be proof enough of life.

"But the tide should have been going out," I tell her. "Not coming in."

She sighs. "Trust me, Phil. We're *not* dead. How do I know? Because I know what dead feels like, and it feels a whole lot better than this. I'm tired and hungry and I'm hurting – I'm also bursting for a pee. No... this feels pretty much like being alive to me."

"So you do believe it then? That your NDE was real."

She closes her eyes and nods. "Of course. Inside of me, yes. I have no choice. But the outside? The side of me that drags me out of bed every morning and gets me to work? The side of me that pays the bills, and curses when I spill nail varnish on the carpet? She's just like the rest of us – a product of our environment, and our culture - incapable of believing in anything magical at all, and holding anyone who does in contempt – including the other side of

me that does. If you know what I mean."

"And what does the rational side of you suggest we do here?"

"That we give it a couple of hours, then go back down to the jetty. Then we sit and watch the ebb, inch by inch. And when the causeway's clear, we'll know for sure it's safe, because the tide will still be going out. Then we cross back to the mainland and get on with our boring, useless, fucking lives. Okay?"

I'm nodding, but I'm not believing it. "It was ebbing this morning – I know it was – but that bore came in like white horses, like a supernatural thing, as if to cut off our escape."

"Rubbish," she says, but she lacks conviction.

Chapter 23

The Sacred Well

Re-entering the house I'm thinking it's with the familiarity of friends this time, unconscious of any embarrassment, and that's progress of a kind. Surely we shall always be close after this? How can we not?

"So," she says."Shall I heat a tin of soup, or some beans or something?"

"No. I thought you were bursting for the loo. You go and do what you need to do. I'll make us something."

"Oh? This should be interesting."

"Ms Divine, I've been feeding myself since I was eighteen. That's thirty years, near enough. Even a fool couldn't fail to have picked up a few culinary tricks in that time."

A quick look in the cupboards reveals more non-perishable edibles. "Em... we have some rice, and some spices here. In fact, altogether we have the makings of a very nice curry. Will that be all right? Is spicy food okay for you?"

"Sounds lovely. Thank you."

So, later on, I'm stirring a pan of tinned meat, while she looks on from the kitchen table, a trace of humour in her eyes. I look at her suddenly, and apologise.

"For what?" she says. "Having me dry-hump you, while I was stoned? I should think so."

"Will you stop going on about that? No, for saying we were dead. That was stupid. We're not. I know we're not. And we just made a mistake with the tides. Again. As for the dry humping bit, need I keep reminding you it was your idea?"

"Apology accepted. As for reminding me about the dry humping – a gentleman wouldn't, even if he's right"

"I accept the apology. As for the other, I promise not to mention it again, if you don't."

"Well,... as for the other, I suppose we'll have to talk about it sooner or later. And seriously. I'm just beginning to see the funny side of it, that's all."

She's smiling now, something impish about her. I wish I could see the funny side too, but it meant the world to me, and I'm wondering if she can really be so easily dismissive, or if it actually meant the world to her as well and she's just better at covering it

up."Funny is it?"

"Yes," she says. "And suspicious."

"Suspicious? That's a new one."

"I mean, are you sure all that talk about your impotence isn't just a line you spin to make girls feel at ease, make them feel sorry for you, then put them up to the challenge of curing you?"

I know she's joking here. "Worked though didn't it?"

She reflects on this. "Yes. Yes it did."

"Listen, I know we weren't ourselves last night... and I'm still very confused about that, but I *am* grateful, Adrienne. Seriously."

"Well... you're welcome. Shall I make some tea while you're doing that?"

"Okay."

We drink the tea with sugar and powdered milk. It doesn't taste too bad. Slowly then, I feel my head returning to a more rational place. The curry's okay too, considering the ingredients we had to start with, and I begin to feel human again. Is that all it was, my lapse into the metaphysical? Just hunger and dehydration? Sure, you think all sorts of strange things when your energy is low. Reality become a bit fluffy round the edges.

Adrienne nods her approval as she samples the curry. "So... you really can cook!"

"I told you. Another reason to share a house with me. Ready meals are pure poison – all that salt. Ughh!"

"We're not buying this house. It's just tried to kill us."

"We were never in any danger."

She looks at me over a plate of steaming and deliciously aromatic rice, and she asks me again: "You trust Gramps that much?"

This pulls me up and makes me reflective for a moment because the answer is yes, or if not Gramps then some other metaphysical messenger, which means for me reality is always going to be a bit fluffy round the edges, whether I'm hungry or not, and to hell with the glassy eyed beer swilling men who'd laugh at such an admission of weakness.

"Actually, it wasn't Gramps. It was Birdy. I felt her in the car with us. She put her hand on my shoulder, urged caution. It could only mean one thing. I'm sorry Adrienne"

"Sorry?"

"Yes... sorry. It was your sister, your dead twin sister, whom you

must miss very much, and here's me, this slightly weird guy you only just met, already using her pet name like he knows her as well as you, which I obviously don't – only I don't know what else to make of it."

She's nodding, looking at me, a sympathy in her eyes, a soft glow, and an unexpected fondness that warms me. "Thank you, Phil. Thank you for respecting that, but you didn't choose Birdy. She chose you."

We decide we should watch the T.V. news for word of any unusual weather that might have interfered with the tides, though short of an asteroid the size of London splashing down mid-Atlantic, I can think of nothing that would cover the events of that weekend. Adrienne investigates, plugging the aerial back in, while I wash the pots.

"No signal," she reports, taking up the dishcloth. "It's satellite anyway. I should have thought of that. No subscription, no service."

"Maybe we should try the land line after all. Get some help with the tide times. I know it's not an emergency... but people dial 999 for much less than that. Or there's another number you call these days for non emergencies, though I can't for the life of me remember what it is."

Adrienne can't remember it either, and anyway, she's not sure. "Is it really worth all that fuss at this stage? Like I said, we'll just go down to the jetty in a few hours and watch the tide ebb. Remember, the last thing you want is for them to send a helicopter for us. You know, *a helicopter*, Phil?"

Even now she can tease me. "Yes... yes of course. You're right. That would be a disaster. They'd have to drug me to get me on board."

"I was thinking... there is something else we've not tried."

"Oh?"

"We could go up to the castle, to the high ground. We might get a signal up there for our mobiles. Download some tide-times... or something?"

"That's a good idea. Let's do it."

"I'll have to change out of my skirt, though. I can't walk far dressed like this. I've got an old pair of leggings in the car. You'll have to promise not to laugh."

"I swear, I'll never laugh at you, Adrienne."

She looks at me, quizzically, reading me, then sighs and leans

close, breathing me in. I catch that familiar honey scent of her, but resist the urge to embrace.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Just seeing if you still smell nice today."

"And?"

She laughs. "You smell of curry sauce. Hot and spicy! Come on. Do you have your mobile?"

So...

Mid-morning sees us walking from the cottage along the track that leads up to the Peele Tower. The sky remains clear, the sun uncomfortably hot now, having already dried the track to dust, and we've not gone a hundred yards before I'm wishing I had a hat for shade. It's also humid and I'm raising a sweat from my brow, Adrienne too. Her leggings are black and bear the pale streaks of paint and plaster dust from decorating. She says they're a disgrace, being so messy, but they reveal her shape with a splendidly immodest candour, so I find no cause for complaint. Her blouse, being nipped in the waist is also uncomfortable for walking, so she's untucked it and unfastened the lower buttons so it can float open and she can catch the air upon the skin of her midriff. But the air is lifeless, and the sun is a hammer on our heads.

We can see the sea, its unbroken plane shimmering blue under a perfect sky. It runs all the way to a lush green mainland. I can make out the distant dotted seaside towns where life goes on as normal, oblivious to our existence – but even in the midst of towns like that I'm persuaded the obscurity of people like us is equally assured, and the bigger the town the more assured it is. What keeps us going in the face of it is a mystery.

"The tide's looking like it's peaked already," I tell her.

"I know. It comes in really fast."

"But surely not so treacherously fast as we saw? Or is that why the house is so cheap? No one who knows the area would want to risk drowning by living here?"

"I don't understand it either. Do you think there'll be a breeze higher up?"

I note the change of subject. "Possibly. I hope so."

"If it's still as hot as this up there, I'm going skyclad. Well... except for my shoes."

"Skyclad?"

"Witchy term. Never mind. It was a joke. Look it up later."

"I'd forgotten you were a witch."

Except I'd not forgotten at all. Indeed I'm beginning to wonder if she can't call down supernatural assistance from the Goddess, or some other Neopagan deity because it's beginning to feel as if we need all the help we can get.

The highest part of the island is crowned with an outcrop of limestone, attractively craggy, and encircled with an iron age earthwork. Atop the outcrop, and seemingly sprouted from it, rises the single shattered keep of the Peele tower. As we come up, breathing hard, I'm conscious of my shirt soaked and clinging. We sit upon a rock and gaze out at the view. It's spectacular.

Having discovered the place, I might have made a habit of coming up here in future, were I not now so afraid of getting myself stranded again by the tides. You'd need a camper and enough time to be flexible about your departure.

A VW Camper, like in the dream, and like the one my father drove.

We're a good few hundred feet above the sea now, and barely half a mile from the mainland, which surely enjoys good mobile reception. But if we're outside of the triangular cell formed by three towers, we might as well be on the moon for all the good sitting here waving our mobiles around will do. Adrienne's already checking her 'phone, shielding the screen from the sun, squinting at it hopefully.

"Nothing," she says. "Not a single bar."

"Same here."

"I'm sorry, Phil. It seemed a good idea."

"It was worth a try."

"But we've climbed all this way for nothing."

"Not for nothing. The view's magnificent, and I can just picture you and Birdy down there in the meadow, with your kite."

She gives me a sulky look, her shoulders hunched. "Not even a breeze today –barely enough to stir the grass, let alone lift a kite."

"Be positive, Ms Divine. The sun is shining. It's a lovely day."

"And with my complexion I'll be lobster red, and burned all over by this evening. But you're right. We should count our blessings. My period's stopped."

"Thanks for sharing that. But... so soon?"

"Well, that's me, Phil. Erratic, and usually all or nothing."

"Well, it's a positive step. What with you curing my impotence, if we're stuck here another night, there's nothing stopping us from

consummating our relationship properly."

She thumps my arm playfully. "Typical man. I should have left you as you were as a service to womankind. Get you working again and all you can think of is shagging anything that moves."

"No, not *anything*."

"Phil, you're not going to become tiresome about this are you?"

"I was only joking."

She sighs. "Men never joke about sex. Even when they joke, they're not joking. And we'll be away from here in a few hours, remember?"

"You really believe that?"

"Don't go all dark on me. It's my turn to be depressed today. Not even Canute could meddle with the tides. I don't see why we should be any different. We saw it come in. In six hours it goes out. We go down to the jetty, and we watch the ebb. Simple. If it doesn't work, you're right, and we really are dead and this really is our purgatory. Though why I should be stuck in it with an oaf like you, I don't know."

I laugh, but the place is getting to me again, and I'm thinking six hours? Something will happen. We'll never leave here now. We'll keep turning up tins of food until we realise we don't actually need them any more, and then we'll look at each other and realise there's no return to life as we once knew it.

And what then?

I gaze down the way we've come. You can see the cottage clearly, see its little walled enclosure, it's fertile bounds a shade greener amid the wildness of the island. I see the dusty track that will lead us back, also a narrow trail through the grass that appears to lead more directly to the eastern wall of the cottage garden.

"Shall we go back that way?" I ask.

She doesn't look keen, giving a mock shudder. "It'll be hot, and muddy after last night's rain, and there'll be flies."

"It looks shorter though."

She smiles. "Okay, you've convinced me."

The path follows a line in the underlying strata, being fairly straight, but also dry and dotted here and there with outcrops of limestone. Some of them have little piles of stones on top, like a marked way in the mountains. The grasses at the wayside are tall, and would be difficult to navigate, but the path, though faint, is easy and pleasant to follow, presenting aspects of the island that

remind us of its beauty in a way the dusty trail did not. It has more of a magical quality about it.

"This is much better," she says. "It must have been worn by the people at the house over generations. I never knew it existed."

"I don't understand this place."

"How do you mean?"

"There are times when it terrifies me, and I want nothing more than to escape it. And then you see it from a different angle, and I can't imagine anywhere in the world being more beautiful."

"That's the fickleness of imagination, Phil. The place doesn't change – only how we see it." She pauses, looks at me. She's sweating impressively, her blouse dark patched, her décolletage slick with rivulets, and I can feel the heat coming off her. "I didn't mean it," she said. "About you being tiresome... you know? You're too much of a gentleman to be like that...

"In fact, I was thinking... well... why not stay over at my place this evening. I have a spare room. You could shower, rest. I could make you a meal, or you could make me another one if your cooking skills are as good as they seem to be. Then you can drive home in the morning."

I'm thinking it sounds perfect. I'm thinking she's telling me she can't make any promises and that she's definitely *not* inviting me into her bed, but she's holding open a door for me, and I'm delighted at the prospect. As if to tease me further, she slips the last few buttons of her blouse and it drops open to reveal her bra –black lace and satin, the pendants glinting in the valley of her moist breasts. She smiles, takes the folds of her blouse and flaps them, as if to cool herself, before tying them in a knot under her bosom. "Sorry... it's unbearably hot, and I'm embarrassed at how much I'm sweating. It's so unladylike. Anyway... what are you thinking?"

I'm thinking how divine her breasts had looked last night, when she'd sat astride me, how divine the smile, how gentle her touch as she'd healed me – stoned or not - Ms Adrienne Divine, estate agent's dogsbody, part time witch, voyager to the afterlife, potential divorcee, mother of two, neurotic, and blind as a bat by night. And divinely perfect. So,... it's a mystery why I'm suddenly playing hard to get: "I was thinking actually, how I haven't got a clean shirt for tomorrow."

"I still have some of Chuck's. He's about your size. I use them for decorating in, but only because he'd be furious – they cost a

fortune."

And I'm still playing with her when I tell her: "I don't mind borrowing another man's shirt, but I draw the line at his underpants, and I'm badly in need of a change of those as well."

Her face is aglow, those eyes so often languorous, now twinkling with mirth. "I didn't keep any of those, but I'll lend you a pair of mine if you like."

"Em,.. really? It's very kind of you. I accept."

She turns away then, tucks her thumbs into the waistband of her leggings, something triumphant in the stance, as if she's pleased I accepted but she needs to hide her pleasure from me. "Pervert!" she chuckles.

Then her eyes light upon the pool. It's a little way off the path, half hidden by an attractive limestone outcrop. She says nothing, but sets off towards it, as if entranced, and I follow.

The pool is a mirror for the sky, and it's fed by a small cascade issuing from a fissure in the outcrop. The water is deep and clear, and on a day like this so inviting I wonder about suggesting we just slide ourselves in and cool off. It's not big enough for more than a couple of strokes to swim, but there's still something special about it, something in the shape of it, and the location. Then I see the standing stone behind the pool, rooted in the earth, beyond the outcrop – not marked in any way – but clearly unnatural. And there's an earthenware bowl by the water's edge, another set upon a rock, as if left there by nymphs.

Adrienne's very quiet as she takes all of this in.

"Could this be your holy well?" I ask. "The one you searched for as a child?"

She nods. "I was thinking of a traditional kind of well – you know? With a bucket and a winch and everything. But I suppose a natural spring like this is more likely. All those years we used to come as children, and this place was here all the time!"

The bowls each contain a handful of pebbles - round and beach-washed. "What are they for, do you think?"

She gestures with her eyes to the pentagram, woven from hawthorn branches, set in a crevice below the dolmen. I feel the hairs rise on my neck at the sight of it, but it's pointing skywards so I'm guessing it signifies the path of light, and nothing of a more devilish nature.

"Wiccan?" I ask.

"Possibly," she says. "Some form of Neopaganism, obviously. Look how the standing stone lines up with the Peele tower. Due east, I'll bet. The equinoctial sunrise. A Neolithic alignment – very interesting! And if there's a total of thirteen pebbles in those bowls, I'd like to bet someone was counting moons."

"Thirteen?"

"Thirteen full moons in a year, Phil. You know? A full moon is the time for spell work. A full moon on the equinox even more-so. That's when you do your really serious spell work."

"But who are we talking about here? Could it be a coven from the mainland?"

"It's possible, but I'm thinking, actually, it was Amelia. It looks like our hostess was a magician."

"Amelia? Well, whoever it was certainly hexed the tides for us."

Adrienne continues to soak up the scene.

"Do you ever cast spells?" I ask."I mean, make up some rhyming wish and cast it at full moon?"

She shushes me, and I'm left regarding her, wondering what she's thinking. And whatever it is, she's serious. "I gave up on that kind of spell work when I was a girl," she says. "Ever since my maths teacher came off his motorbike and spent six months in hospital. I'd cast a spell putting an end to that morning's maths test, so clearly I was responsible.

"Coincidence, you're thinking? And maybe you're right – it's up to each of us what we choose to believe, but if you ask me it's always dangerous. Spell work. It's like shooting through a hedge. You never know what's on the other side. You never know what the consequences are going to be. And we must never harm anyone, never do anything that might interfere with the natural way of things."

"What about healing?"

"Healing's okay, I think. But even there you're better casting for the best outcome, and leaving it to the universe to decide what that might be, even if it's ultimately for a sick person to die more quickly and less painfully, than to recover and suffer for the rest of their lives."

"I thought paganism was about control over nature."

"To some magicians it is. It gives them a big ego-trip, but it always catches up with them in the end. Personally, I think we need to be more passive. We can certainly call down the forces of our

collective imaginations to alter our material reality, but like I said, the universe will always demand a sacrifice in return. And if you don't offer one of your own, it'll take one at random. Cast a spell for deliverance from your toxic marriage - sure it can do that - but it might take your kids as payment, and maybe even your life too. And, like that time I was telling you I cast a spell to get me out of washing dishes in that restaurant? I was thinking maybe promotion – say, to waiting on – but instead the place shut down. I still got my wish, just not how I expected it. "

What she's telling me makes an eerie kind of sense, and as a way of viewing the world it's as descriptive as any other, possibly more-so, since it takes account of emotion and symbol, and meaning, and balance.

"You cured me."

"Yes, I straightened your willy out and now you're wanting to point it at me at every opportunity. Like I said, a woman has to think these things through very carefully."

"That's not true, Adrienne... I... I don't want to do that."

"You don't? Why, what's wrong with me?"

"Look, don't try to confuse me with that one again. I know how complicated things are for you. Like I said, I'd be happy to be counted among your friends, to help you if I can, and no strings."

"I know... and it's sweet of you, but I'm not sure what I feel about that."

"Nothing to feel. Take it or leave it. I'm here if you need me."

"I know, silly. It's the other thing I was meaning – not sure how I felt about... the *other* thing."

"Eh?"

"I may not want you to be so calm and gentlemanly about it. I may want you to be gagging for it – after all a woman should be insulted if you're not so horny for her you don't have a hard on every time she looks at you."

"Adrienne... stop. You're playing with me, tying me in knots again. And it's cruel, because you know how easy it is."

"No, I'm not playing. But I *am* contrary. If you so much as think about making love to me again, I'll slap your face and have the cops on you for thinking I'm so easy. But if you don't think about it, my sense of self worth will need scraping off the carpet every day until you change your mind. I know,... infuriating, isn't it? If I were you I'd stay at least a hundred miles away from me." She laughs.

"Anyway, we need to take this stuff back to the house."

"Em,...Okay."

Sometimes she leaves me breathless.

"Can you get the pentangle. Don't worry it won't bite. I'll get the bowls. I think it's what she'd want – Amelia I mean. Burn the pentangle, scatter the pebbles on the beach where they look like they came from. Leave the pots for the next owner to plant geraniums in, or something."

"You mean... restore the pool to nature?"

"Yes. You're really quite sensitive aren't you. I'll make a witch of you yet."

"You mean a warlock?"

"No such thing, Phil."

She takes hold of my arm, steadies me. This is what she's like: momentarily stunning, then tender, allowing you to catch up, to breathe, to know it's okay, that she's not butting up against your defences, that you can let go. And if you can let go, she'll feel safe enough to let go a little more herself next time. Knowing Adrienne, really *knowing* her, will involve a long and subtle initiation, and this is how it's done. I can only hope she allows me to stay the course.

She's looking at the scene again, watching, quietly. "Places like this have spirits attached to them, you know? Do you believe in fairies? Of course you don't. It's absurd. But if you do spell work in places like this, you bind the faery up in your magic -– they can't resist getting involved and lending a hand you see, because that's their nature. And they make for powerful spells. But you have to release them afterwards. I'm wondering if Amelia managed to do that properly. It doesn't look like it. This would have been a permanently sacred place to her. I'm getting the feeling she never had the chance, that her final illness came on too suddenly. Sorry. All of this sounds like nonsense, doesn't it?"

"I'm thinking it sounds beautiful, actually. Romantic."

"Romance? Yes... there's a certain romance attached to the Craft. It's what many find so attractive about it. Anyway... come on, let's restore it. Let the faery get back to their business. Who knows, it might bring us luck and they'll let us off the island next time."

"Should we also..."

"What?"

"I don't know... say something?"

"Like what?"

"Cast a releasing spell or something."

"Don't joke, Phil, this is a serious business."

"Do I look like I'm joking?"

"No... no you don't. I'm sorry. But it's not my place. I wouldn't know what to say. Let's not get carried away, eh? Let's just remove this stuff."

So we descend the pathway with our relics, relics of the Neopagan crone that was Amelia Fox. On the patio, I burn the dried hawthorn twigs that had made up the pentangle – set them in the barbecue with a fire-lighter and touch a match to them while Adrienne walks the short way to the beach with the thirteen pebbles to scatter.

I'm wondering at my sudden participation in this pagan rite, when a cloud takes the sun and I see a girl standing out in the meadow. It's just my imagination, like always, though I swear she has a substance to her. She's the faery from the well perhaps, even though she looks a lot like Birdy.

She's endearingly pretty, and obviously benign if our relationship thus far is anything to go by, but right now she looks a little sad. Why can't she just tell me what's expected of us here? Obviously I wouldn't understand it, like Adrienne's blog containing the meaning of life – words are never enough and you can write the secret down for others as many times as you like, but they'll never believe it. They have to be shown the symbols time and time again, and then they have to walk the path until they're weary of it, until they finally, spontaneously, *get it.*

But I'm done with that for now. I'm a formerly impotent middle aged man thinking of women again. And, forgive me, but I'm also thinking of tonight, wondering what Adrienne's flat is like, wondering if she means it about me driving home tomorrow wearing a pair of her knickers. The thought of it is making me tingle with a deliciously erotic thrill – soft cloth that has enfolded her sex now enfolding mine. I'm wondering if she's right, if I am perverted in some way, or even a touch transgendered. I'm also wondering if Adrienne meant what she said, that a part of her at least is wanting me to ache for her, even though the other half was rather hoping I wouldn't.

Stop it, Phil, you're starting to swell. But oh... let it... how good that feels! The sweet rush of it... I try some more... imagining the cool of her bedsheets, the heat of her touch, the taste of her kiss and

a smooth silken wetness as I enter her... oh... STOP!

The pentangle flares and fades to ash... then the sun comes out again, and Adrienne is returning from the beach, hands in pockets, a thoughtful air about her. She sees me looking and she waves.

Chapter 24

Blind

We're by the jetty at noon, the pair of us leaning back upon on the bonnet of her car and gazing out across the plane of the sea. We're buttoned up again, though looking somewhat crumpled by now – her blouse and my shirt creased, her hair mussed and me with a smudge of soot across my nose that she's just rubbed gently away with her thumb.

"Would you ever think of getting married again?" I ask her.

"Don't be stupid," she replies. "I'm a witch now. We don't do that sort of thing."

This surprises me. "Oh?"

"We hand-fast, for a year and a day. And if either party wants out after that, it's okay."

"Sounds reasonable to me."

"Pfft. That's because you're a man. A year and a day's just about long enough for her to get up the duff, and him to fuck off to pastures new."

"I'd like to prove you wrong about men."

"You'd be wasting your time. Do you still want to come round to my place?"

"Yes, of course. Thank you."

"I'm not having sex with you if that's what you're thinking."

“Sex with me *again*, you mean.”

“Last night didn’t count. We were off our heads.”

I'm barely listening to our banter now. These last words of hers come to me through the swim of other thoughts as I gaze out across the water, trying to read the waves. It seems like we've been here a lifetime already and there's a feeling in my bones something's wrong, that the tide isn't going to turn, that we’ll be here forever. But what am saying?

It *has* to turn.

"If I can spend just one more day in your company, Adrienne, it'll be worth more than a lifetime of sex."

"Oh *do* shut up."

"Sorry. Has the tide turned, do you think?"

"Not that I can tell. There's no obvious flow to it. Perhaps we're still a little early. Do you mean it?"

"About how much I'd value just one more day with you? I'm afraid I do, yes. Are you burning? The sun's so hot."

"I'm all right. It's better than baking in the car. What the hell am I going to do with you?"

"You keep asking me that. Just let me inside, Adrienne."

"Inside what?"

"Your confidence."

"You'd stand a better chance getting inside my pussy - but not much."

"I was afraid you'd say something crude and irreverent like that."

She sighs. "All right. In case you hadn't noticed, I let you in ages ago. You're sweet and lovely, and I *trust* you." She squeezes my hand. "But if you start getting possessive, I warn you, I can be very cruel."

I feel a rush of warmth and an unexpected acceptance, but I take heed of the warning too. "Understood." I also wonder if I have the stamina, and the mental agility to keep up with her.

By mid afternoon, we're aching-tired from sitting there, and I can feel my face beginning to tingle with the sun. But at last we have the first hints of the tide slipping out now – a few more feet of the on-ramp revealing itself and, far away, by the mainland, hints of sand and mud.

"Do you see it?" she asks.

"The ebb? Yes... looks like we're in with a chance after all."

But with the turn there's come a hazing of those distant views, a slow filtering out of the details of the mainland. The sky above remains blue, the sun very hot, but there's a mist forming over the sea.

Adrienne is watching. "I don't like the looks of this."

"The mist?"

"It's getting thicker."

As she says this, the shark's tooth profile of Refuge Crag becomes blurry, then a hazy black silhouette as it's swallowed up, first to shadow, then to nothingness. I feel a sinking in my stomach and a strange heaviness in my bones. There's nothing unnatural in what we're seeing of course... it's just the question of timing.

"Are you okay in mist?" I ask.

"As good as blind." She looks at me then, lips drawn tight, her features hardening. She takes a breath and hands me her keys. "We can't miss this one," she says. "You drive us over. It's not like it's

dark, so I'm sure my phobia can be placated. I'll be all right. I just can't see well enough in fog to risk it."

"Okay."

At any other time there might have been something symbolic in this. As well as her car-key, there are the keys to her home and other secrets, all looped together on the same ring. But as the mist thickens, I begin to doubt even my own ability to drive us over safely. In the space of an hour, visibility has closed from twenty miles to a dozen yards, and it's still thickening. The heat has gone too, and we begin to feel a chill.

"You really need to lose your dread of spectacles, you know? I find them quite sexy on a woman."

Adrienne shivers. "P-pervert."

We retreat into the car's interior where the glass has trapped the heat and there we continue our wait for the causeway to clear, but the mist is so thick now, we can no longer see the jetty.

"I'm starting to think this place is cursed," she says.

"Please, try to remain rational, Ms Divine."

"I can't. I'm a witch, remember? Rational is not how I think – well not any longer."

"Then think like a trainee estate agent."

She does indeed think on this for a moment, then shakes her head decisively. "I'm not that person any more. I'm like you. I want to be my other self. My real self. I want to write poems no one will ever read. I want to be an out of the closet practising Neopagan. I want to quit my job. I want to walk into Crabby Carstair's office, tell her exactly what I think of her, then pee all over her desk."

"Woa,.. I'd like to see that."

"I'm serious. Well, about quitting anyway." Then, anxiously: "I really don't like the look of this, Phil."

I get out and walk down to the ramp, follow it out a little way to where the sea still laps, and I crouch down. It's ebbing quickly now, but I can barely see a few yards out, and I'm thinking it might be safer to cross on foot than take the car. Or I could walk, keeping myself central in the causeway, and Adrienne could follow in the car, slowly, keeping me in sight – or she could walk and I could follow – except her eyes are no good in these conditions for doing either.

And it's a long way to walk.

I hear the car door slam, and then her footsteps as she comes

down to join me. There's something shuffling and uncertain about them as she tests her way. It's just a mile to the mainland, but suddenly it feels like a hundred. What strange twist of fate is this? She's right; it's like the island is cursed, holding onto us for something. But what else have we to offer? Does it want me to say yes to buying the house? Well I'm afraid after this weekend, I'll be unlikely to set foot on Leven Isle again – if we ever get off it in the first place. Or is it something still to do with Amelia or Birdy, or Adrienne? What is the magical key that will release us?

Gramps, I could really use your help on this.

Adrienne's hand drops heavily onto my shoulder. I have the feeling she only saw me there at the last minute – that she nearly fell over me. I feel the tremor in her arm as she crouches. She's disorientated by the swirling of the vapour. So am I. My instinct is to steady her, but I'm shy of touching – even after last night, or more to the point perhaps *because* of last night.

"What do you think?" she asks.

"I think someone up there really doesn't want us to leave this place."

"You don't feel you can drive us over?"

"My eyes are twenty twenty, but I'd be a fool to risk it in this."

"Then let's wait."

"We can't spend another night on the island."

"It looks like we'll have to. It's better than driving off the causeway and getting stuck in the sand. And it might clear in an hour or so. There's still plenty of time to cross. At least we know it's ebbing now."

"But if anything the mist's getting thicker. I'm sorry, Adrienne. I think this is in for the day."

When I look back up the ramp, I'm unable to make out any details. About the only thing I can see is the faintly ridged pattern of concrete directly under my feet. We'll be lucky if we can make it back to the car at this rate. Gingerly, I begin to feel my way, but Adrienne calls out, saying she can't see me. I turn and take her hand, then fumble up the ramp, bringing her gently along behind. As we climb just a matter of yards, the mist thins a little with the height gained, so I can move without fear of stumbling. Even so, we only manage to locate the car by walking into it.

"It might not be so thick up by the house," I tell her. "It seems very low lying. Best to leave the car here, and just inch our way

back on foot."

I'm still holding her hand, and she's in no hurry to recover it. It feels small, quite lost and impossibly soft, so that that I'd have to squeeze very hard to tell if there was substance or just smoke. It's almost as if I'm imagining her. Then I feel Birdy drift close and take my free arm – another imaginary presence, and me caught between the two – the one leading, the other following. Both of them divine; the Divine sisters.

The fog becomes less opaque as we move up the lane. Gradually hedgerows and potholes reveal themselves at a more comfortable range, and the air becomes by degrees more luminous as the sun strokes the boiling ceiling of it. Then we step out of it and we see the cottage, sunlit, up ahead, and Leven Isle all green, riding on a white sea of vapour, stretching out in every direction, a seemingly infinite plane. I laugh, struck as much by the beauty as by the delicious irony of it.

"Your faery-folk are definitely having us on," I tell her.

"Hush! Don't joke about the Faery. They have short tempers, and we're in enough trouble as it is." She lets go of my hand, uses it instead to shield her eyes from the sun as she gazes out over the billowing plane. It's like we're flying, brushing the clouds, and Leven Isle a mysterious floating kingdom in the sky.

"Impossible," she says.

"Just bad luck."

She shakes her head. "I really don't know what to suggest here."

"A cup of tea?"

"Is that your solution to all of life's problems?"

"Pretty much."

"And then?"

"If it's not cleared in an hour or two, we'll have to make plans for the night. We have food now. We'll be okay."

"I'm beginning to get the feeling you're enjoying this."

"No... just trying to remain level headed."

"Says he who thought we might actually be dead this morning, floating about in some weird kind of purgatory, like kindred spirits?"

"I did didn't I? Sorry about that. I like the sound of kindred spirits though."

"Don't push your luck."

"All right. Sorry."

She hugs herself. "This place is challenging me, Phil. It's testing me."

"It's testing us both."

"I feel like it's goading me – all that Neopagan stuff we found this morning. I only know one way of dealing with it, and that's by giving rein to a side of me I'm afraid you're going to find ridiculous."

"Don't count on me finding any side of you ridiculous, Adrienne. If you want to let the witch out, then let her out. I'm not afraid of her."

She checks her 'phone, but not for signal strength. Instead she flicks her way through a plethora of little apps until she comes to one that looks like a trinity of crescent moons. An ephemeris. "Just checking what time the moon's up."

"And?"

"Ten," she says.

As she speaks I take a coin and turn it. Heads. Tails.

"What are you doing?"

"Just checking what kind of moon it will be."

"By my reckoning it'll be full."

"And by mine it'll be real."

She's amused. "Of course it'll be real," she says.

But as I look about me at the world now, I wonder how any of it can possibly be... real.

Chapter 25

Sacrifices

Above the mist, in the sun, it's still very hot, so we sit out on the patio at the back of the house. Adrienne has her eyes lightly closed, as if she's meditating on something. Her expression is serene, but I know she's troubled.

"I've been meaning to ask you," she says. "That ring you wear. It's your great great grandfathers' you said?"

"Yes."

She twirls the ring on her own finger, the one she moved from her left hand to her right last night, divorcing herself, symbolically at least, from Chuck. "Why are you drawn to him, do you think?"

"Gramps? He's the oldest ancestor I have an image for - a sepia photograph, taken about the time of his marriage in 1881, the same year that's hallmarked into the ring. Why my mother thought of it, I don't know."

"1881?"

"Yes,... it's one of those numbers for me. Do you have them? They get stuck in your head and you start noticing them all over the place.1881's one of mine."

"It's an interesting number. Symmetrical. And in numerological terms it reduces to 9 of course. And numbers are archetypes, you know? Nine is the archetype of change, transformation. Add just one more thing to it, and it lifts everything up to a new order."

"So what's your recurring number then?"

"Right now it's 144. Lacks symmetry, but what can you do? I'm not so centred as you – still a little off kilter. It's my house number. Like you, I see it all over the place. It's also the balance of my current account, which is worrying because we've still a week to go before payday. But anyway, that reduces to nine as well. And my ring's hallmarked 1890, which also reduces to nine."

"Nine. Transformation. Change. In what way, do you think?"

"I don't know... but something. The ring, why wear it? I'm not questioning it, just inviting you to explore it with me. Maybe there's an answer to your question there."

"I find it comforting. Like I said, I've worn it since I graduated. I travelled a lot in those early years, including some pretty ropey places – the sort of places where you had to hire men with guns to

avoid the risk of kidnap. After a while you find you've invested a lot in a talisman like that. You must feel the same about your ring – you get to the point where it feels strange if you're not wearing it. You feel vulnerable."

"I wouldn't let Chuck buy me a wedding ring. He had in mind a big, ostentatious thing, something to show off how wealthy he was in those days, but I wanted this one – ancient, and like yours that same connection with my ancestors. There's that air of mystery, and yes, the sense of it being some sort of talisman, warding off an unfortunate fate. I should have known then we were on divergent paths, he and I."

"Fifteen years isn't bad, Adrienne. And you have your children."

"Yes... my children."

"You'll see them again. Surely Chuck can't deny you that... and if he tries, surely, there must be some sort of legal process to be explored there. Maybe he's hoping you won't have the stomach for it, that's all. But he's plainly in the wrong here. Maybe you only need to call his bluff and he'll cave in..."

"I hope you're right. I'm just afraid I don't have what it takes. You know what I'm like. Neurotic, blind as a bat..."

"Stop."

"What?"

"That's not the Adrienne Divine I know."

"You don't know Adrienne Divine."

"All right. Then I've seen what Adrienne Divine can be. So become that person. Wear those pendants on the outside of your blouse for all to see."

"You think? But there's still a lot of prejudice Phil. A lot of religious bigotry, and it's getting worse. The world's a crazier place than it used to be. I'd be afraid, I think, to make a statement like that."

"They don't burn witches any more. Most don't take ideas of soul and spirit seriously at all these days. We're too busy shopping."

"Still, I'd be afraid. And it's an inner path for me, not for showing off."

"Fair point. You don't do it with others, then?"

"A coven you mean?" She gives a shake of the head and a faint shudder. "Ugghh! I don't take my clothes off for just anyone you know?"

"Do they really do that? Dance naked by moonlight?"

"Some do, yes. And they have orgies on Beltain nights... I mean, I believe they do. But I'm just not the coven type. It's too important a thing for me to involve other people in. And I'm like you, an introvert. I'd just end up going along with everyone else at the expense of my own ideas. That's not the person I want to be."

"So be the person you *want* to be, Adrienne."

"I'm trying." She twirls her ring slowly. "And I think I can do it... but only here, where no one's watching."

"Except me."

"Oh, you're different. I can explain myself to you without feeling like I'm having to justify every little quirk. It's not like that with most people. Most people just get on my nerves."

"And I don't?"

She smiles. "Not all the time. Not when it matters." As she speaks she begins to twirl the ring on her finger. "It's very precious to me, this ring."

"I'm sure it is."

"It would leave me empty to find myself without it."

"I'm sure I'd feel the same about mine."

"Would you like to try it on?"

"But your hands are so small, I doubt it would fit."

"It might fit your little finger. Try it."

I'm puzzled by the look in her eyes. Something's brewing here. Does she mean to make me a gift of her ring? I can't take it, not something so precious. No... wait, that's not it. It's something else, but she's hard to read and I can't outguess her. I let her take hold of the little finger of my right hand, and she slides the ring in place. It's loose, so she tries the third finger, and it's a snug fit, brushing up against my other ring.

"That's interesting," she says.

"Oh?"

"It means your ring will fit me."

"Em... yes. Would you like to try?"

She nods, so I slip both rings off and offer her mine. She pushes it on like it's for keeps, twirls it snugly into place, then gives me back her ring when I offer it to her.

"No, wear it," she says, and then... "I'm asking a lot, I know, but can I wear this, until we part company?" Then seeing my look of surprise: "I promise you, on my life, I *will* return it, when we part company for the last time. I can't explain right now – it's just a

feeling I'm getting."

It's not that I don't trust her, it's more that I'm trying to get at the significance of this exchange. She registers the pause, then touches her fingers to her ring, the one I'm now wearing, twirls it slowly, as if screwing it into place on me, then says: "I'm hardly likely to forget, am I? Not while you're wearing this."

Such things can't always be explained. I can only see how important it is by the burning look in her eyes. "All right."

She takes a deliberate breath. "Thank you. You're wanting me to be that person, Phil. Well here she is. You were right, earlier. We should have said some words up at the well this morning. We'll do it tonight. At moonrise, at ten."

"But the causeway might be clear before then."

"You can check, but I doubt it. This fog won't lift 'til morning."

I have an image of Gramps, tapping out his pipe into the barbecue. He reloads with a fresh charge of Long-Cut, then pauses a while before lighting up, gives me a wink, but when I look directly at him, he's already gone. He's reminding me of something Adrienne said, that you never cast a spell or ask anything of the universe without first making a sacrifice, or it will take one of its own choosing, and if Adrienne's working up a spell, then it's a big one, and it seems to involve me. And if I'm right we've already made our sacrifices to one another with the rings. But it's a temporary thing – until we part for the *last* time, she said, and I'm wondering if that will be enough?

"Adrienne, you will be careful, won't you?"

"At the well?" She nods. "It's all right. I'll have you watching over me."

"I'm not sure I'll be much use."

"The worst thing that can happen is I'll fall in the water. You can swim can't you?"

"Em... yes."

"Good, because I can't."

It seems to me the world of the Neopagan isn't that much different to the mystic. We mystics look for symbols in the world and try to read them like a secret language, try to interpret their meaning. Neopagan too work with symbols, but where the mystic is content to work with reality as he finds it, the Neopagan seeks to respectfully negotiate their path and to influence outcomes. All of this requires a belief in a dimension of reality beyond what we can

see. I accept it, based upon the evidence of my dream-time, Adrienne because her near-death experience leaves her no other choice.

"I thought you said it was like shooting through a hedge – you never know what 's on the other side."

"I won't be asking for anything specific."

"Then what?"

"Can you trust in the mystery, Phil? Can you open yourself up, be trusting, and loving, and honest and kind?"

"Open myself to what?"

"To the best possible outcome, whatever that might be. But first, there's the question of the sacrifice."

"I thought it was the rings."

"The rings are part of it," she says. "As for the other, I'm not sure I'm up to it, you neither, but we'll see. I can't tell you now. Afterwards. When it's done."

"Can't you give me a clue?"

"Yes... I'm going to ask something else of you. You must feel free to say no. But believe me when I say it, that I'm sincere, and above all, I'm not joking."

"But that's no help at all."

"I know it's not. Be patient. You'll find out soon enough. I promise."

Chapter 26

Ritual

I don't need to go all the way back down to the jetty to know the causeway is impassable. It's late afternoon, and the sun's casting a buttery light over the billowing mist-topped plain of the bay. I stand in the lane and look around at the eerie vision of Leven Isle afloat in the clouds. The tide will be coming in again anyway – maybe – I don't really know, nor do I care right now. Ahead of me lies the prospect of another night in the house, which just now is catching the light and reflecting gold from the window-panes. It's welcoming and strangely cathartic, working some kind of miracle in me.

There's a chair by the front door, Amelia sitting in it, catching the softer rays upon her face while she knits her fractal patterned creation. There's an upturned flower pot beside her, upon which Gramps has perched himself in order to similarly catch the sun, while sucking dreamily on his pipe. He checks his watch, marks the time, then touches his thumb to his nose and casts me a cheeky wink. When I look directly at them, they're both gone of course. There's just Adrienne in the doorway, leaning upon the frame, the curve of her hip voluptuous and inviting my hand, inviting it to linger, while I dip my head and we kiss,...

If only.

I remember saying that afternoon there was no way we could spend another night on the island, but I didn't really mean it and I'm looking forward to it now like a man contemplating his wedding night.

"You're right," I tell her. "The mist hasn't budged at all."

She has the notebook in her hand, the dainty silver pen between her fingers, and she twirls it thoughtfully, skilfully, having it do somersaults across her knuckles while she looks at me.

"Been writing something?"

I'm wondering if it's the poem – the one she promised me.

She nods. She's growing quieter, falling inside herself, becoming thoughtful. She doesn't offer anything and I respect her privacy. My notebook has become her Book of Shadows, more personal and private than a diary, and more deadly to the snooper, for there are spells in it as well as secrets.

She's found an old rug, rolled up and stashed beside the fridge-freezer. It's about six feet square, Chinese style, a little worn in the middle. We'll carry it up with us, she tells me, and it'll give us something to sit upon while we wait for the moon. She's also found a supermarket bag-for-life, jute-weave with a ladybird motif, into which she's put a handful of candles, and a box of matches on top of some other stuff, the likes of which I can't even begin to guess.

Dusk is around nine, the sun swelling to a flattened orange disk, quaking as it sets fire to the mist, and it casts long shadows over the green. Adrienne doesn't want to wait until dark, she tells me, or she'll struggle making her way, so we set off with the sun at our backs, the rolled rug between us – me at the front, Adrienne behind. She's wearing the sun-dress again, and looks lovely in it – her legs bare and muscular. She's also dispensed with the cardigan, though I note she's carrying it in the bag, in case of cold later on. Her shoulders look soft and finely hollowed. I would love to trace my fingers over them while she sleeps!

Tonight perhaps?

I'm wondering how easy the well will be to find, approaching from this direction, but we discover the land is full of clues. There's the crag of course, with the castle, lit with pink now, and in the middle distance, a knot of lower crags which soon reveals the dolmen as a plain marker – at least in this light. It's due east, and lined up perfectly with the castle, our long shadows pointing us directly towards it.

"It must be mid-summer solstice then – or thereabouts."

"Yes," she says. "A full moon on the meridian. Mid-summer. It should be quite a sight, quite a night. I just hope there aren't any midges to spoil it."

As we come up to the pool, the sun has sunk to a cherry ember, and the land is darkening, the pool reflecting the pale sky and seeming luminous now, the dolmen reflected in it like a stubby finger. We unfurl the rug and she bids me stand at one end of it, while she stands at the opposite. Then she kicks off her flats, slips the straps of her dress and lets it fall to her ankles. She's wearing nothing underneath and registers my shock with a little smile, then tips her chin at me and says: "You too."

She stands as comfortable in her skin as in her clothes, her hands held loosely at her sides, a posture of perfect relaxation. I doubt I can hold myself so proudly as this. Indeed I feel ridiculous

struggling from my trousers and my shirt, but there we are. Then she takes a handful of razor-clams from the bag, lays them around the rug – first at the cardinal points, then the cross quarters, and their subdivisions until they form a circle around us, and they shine in the failing light, painting out a ring of something pure, something protective.

She says nothing while she does this, but I can see her concentrating, her movements fluid as a slow motion dance, graceful and nymph-like in her nudity. And then she sits half-lotus style closes her eyes and sinks into quiet. She's not instructed me in anything, so I merely follow her lead, no stranger to meditation, and I try to empty my head of any thoughts that might dissipate the charge.

The air is warm, with only the slightest breath upon our skins. The body tingles in its nudity beside her. She's so still, so perfectly serene, while in her mind she repeats the secret pattern of words she drafted out that afternoon, sealed safe in her Book of Shadows which now rests upon her thigh. Then the moon comes up and the darkening land is lit with silver – the sky a deep, deep blue, black streaked with a smattering of cloud, and the moon coming up behind the crag.

Adrienne lifts her arms, her palms turned upward, her breaths a steady beat and silent. And the night is quiet, around us nothing is stirring, nothing sinister nor strange, but I sense a rising charge spurred by imagination. It fills me, swells my sex, and this embarrasses me, but when I move to cover it, Adrienne is ahead and stays my hand.

"Let it be," she whispers. "I feel it too."

This arcane devotion haunts me, and Adrienne is the perfect priestess, the goddess, the muse, traveller in the spirit lands. Yes, imagination – all of it. I keep saying that, but then tell me: what is *not* imagination?

I feel a shiver then and I twitch in spooked alarm as a ghostly sprite settles by the water's edge. Adrienne is spooked by it too. I hear her give a soft gasp as she takes in breath – but it unfolds itself, and spreads harmlessly upon the water, a gentle curl of vapour. Her calm returns at once, and I cannot break the mood with my irrational fears. Another sprite spirals up from the land, and is carried towards the castle by a current of air. Others follow. The air is changing with the going down of the sun, and the mist is rising

from the sea.

Adrienne lights candles now, four in all, and sets them in saucers at the corners of the rug. She's struggling to see, struggling to guide the match to the wick. But she perseveres, her tongue held endearingly between her lips for focus. The candles take and settle down, each to a steady flame.

She finds the centre of the rug, stands there, hand outstretched for mine. I take it, and rise to meet her. She smiles, strokes my face, then embraces me and says: "Make love to me?"

"But I thought..."

She catches my hand and guides it down to the soft well of her sex. Guides my fingers a little way so they slip into the moist hollow, and I catch my breath. "Adrienne?..."

She glows in the moonlight, nods, leans close and her heat soaks into me, melting me, filling me with such longing. I *am* dreaming this. It *cannot* be true... unless...

"You're not,... stoned are you?"

She shakes her head, smiles, twinkles with encouragement. "Lie with me."

As we lay upon the rug, she guides me, so with perfect ease I'm sliding suddenly, shockingly deep into her well. And she's rising to meet me.

How many women? Not many... indeed too few have made me feel this way, too few have risen to me as I have sunk to them. But in this, Adrienne needs as I need, and we meet in a place of mutual authenticity.

Then she's tensing as she comes in already on a wave of something cosmic, quivering, dry lips parted, but eyes lightly closed in surrender to an ethereal thing as the more essential part of her drops free, drops stone-like, plummeting to the depths of her unconscious. And as she falls, she mutters a silent mantra, casts a spell in the charged, charmed throes of orgasm. Then I burst inside of her, there's a bright flowering in my head and finally, as consciousness ebbs there comes the slow, stunned blackness of...

I'm out of body now, gazing down upon my sleeping form, feeling her tenderness as she eases herself free of my weight. I'm feeling her purpose as she paces the circle and opens the ring by gathering the jewel-like clams. Then she covers me with a corner of the rug, dresses and sits cross legged to keep quiet vigil until I wake. Is that what I'm really seeing?

"Adrienne?"

I'm back, I think. I feel her hand upon my shoulder, a soft, reassuring press, try to raise myself, but she wills me gently down, a peculiar heaviness overwhelming me. Am I in or out of body now? I want to rewind, to experience anew every moment of what's just happened, experience it in a slower time, time enough to savour. Then I realise I'm weeping, and her fingers are brushing tears from my lashes, and she's leaning close, her hair a silken cascade across my face, and she's kissing me.

"You're not going to react like this every time we make love, are you?"

The moon is much higher now, and Leven Isle a pale blue ship, alone, floating on a white sea. I see more stars than I have imagined possible. I can even see the roadway of the galactic plane, so clear, so detailed, the colours around it, the tones... is that even... possible?

"My God, just look at that! Adrienne... I'll remember this night for the rest of my life."

"Oh, Phil, you're so sweet."

"What did you wish for?"

"When?"

"I saw you. You were saying something, when you came. That was the charge, wasn't it, when you came? The spell, the *real* spell?"

She nods.

"But what was it?"

"Just deliverance, and understanding."

"And the sacrifice?"

"You mean you don't know?"

"No. Tell me?"

"Letting go. Lightening the load, and giving myself... to you." She takes my ring, slips it from the third finger of her right hand to the third finger of her left. "A year and a day, Philip Arthur *Sampson*. If you want me. You can be a total bastard, and I'll weather you for that long, because I'm made of stronger stuff than perhaps you're thinking. And I need you to get me to America."

She slips her ring from my right hand, moves it to my left but senses my hesitation. "What? Cold feet is it? And so soon?" She laughs and shakes her head. "It's all right, I won't hold you to it. But I'm sincere. I have to be. I've more to lose, being the one who cast the spell."

I straighten my finger to accept the ring and she raises an eyebrow in query. "Oh? You're sure?"

"Yes. Of course. Yes. A hundred times yes."

She slides it home. "All right. Better get dressed now, then we can head back. It's growing cold. So,... Midsummer night, a year from now. And the day after, it releases us from any obligations to each other. Understood?"

"But what if I don't want to be released?"

"Then you'll be a fool or a saint."

I dress quickly, while she folds the rug and packs the bag. Then I stand a while, staring once more at the impossible richness of the night sky, observing the play of my thoughts, turning each like the pages of an ancient book, pages worn thin as a butterfly's wings, staining my fingers with strange patterns... symbols I cannot decipher.

I simply cannot believe any of this, so God help me, I take the coin from my pocket and hesitate to look.

Heads... Heads...

Dreaming!

What? When did that happen?

My breath escapes me and my heart collapses. How I'd longed for all of this to be true! To be hand-fasted, tied, secured, bonded *to Adrienne*.

"Phil?"

What? Am I still here? Not surfacing back to consciousness yet? At least the making love was real, wasn't it? Yet where I am now, in reality, is anyone's guess. And Adrienne? This isn't Adrienne any more? Then what is she? An avatar, a ghost animated only by my thoughts and impressions of her?

How to address her, then?

"I'm sorry. I drifted off for a moment."

But whoever she is, whatever she is, still symbolises the most precious part of me, and I'd do well to be as tender and protective, and respectful as I'd have the universe be with me.

"Will you be all right going down in the dark, my love?"

"My love? Are you taking the piss? Don't push your luck." She wrinkles her nose, senses something changed in me, but this is really me fearing she will sense it, and making her sense it, because this is what encounters in the dream-scape are like.

"Just keep me close," she says. "And walk slow. I'll be all right."

Chapter 27

A Game of Go

So here – wherever here is – am I bonded to her, hand-fasted they call it, but whatever they call it, the feel of it is one of being wrapped in love. I fear its loss, but set aside that fear because to fear in such a space as this is to be released back into the place where Ego feels itself most secure – even though in human terms that particular reality is the least secure environment to which we can ever venture.

It takes a long time to return to the house, one painstaking step at a time, and Adrienne, holding on, testing her way as if blind, because this is what I expect of her. We both of us smell now. My body odour is a dull mushroomy affair compared to hers which has something of the sharp-sweetness of pear-drops about it.

"I'd better borrow the dress," she says, as if she's read my mind. "I'll wash it, and find a way of returning it."

Where are we?

"What's that you say?" she asks.

But I didn't say anything. I only thought it. "Nothing," I tell her. "I can make out the house now. It's not far. Are you managing?"

"Yes."

"Not going too fast? I'm worried you'll turn your ankle."

"I'm all right. We did well tonight."

"Yes."

But again, where are we? I mean *really*? Are we still up by the sacred well? I can think of no other place – me sleeping that post coital sleep and she in silent vigil beside me. I know I don't have long to enjoy this – an hour or two? The night isn't that warm and she'll grow cold or bored, and I'll wake or she'll wake me, and we'll have to make this journey again.

We made love though, didn't we? Did I check for heads or tails before she performed that ritual? When was the last time? I'm thinking now, searching my memory through the sluggish membrane of sleep. Ah, yes – we'd come up from the jetty, in the mist. She'd checked her ephemeris, and I'd last turned the coin then, confirmed reality, and there'd been an unbroken chain of conscious experience, up to the moon rising tonight, and her asking me to make love to her. At least that much was lived, experienced, in

material reality. Only then had there been a post-coital transition to the lucid dream-scape, and to this...

I test things further by changing the house – nothing drastic – just tidy away the traces of Amelia's life, make it more our own, at least for this one brief sojourn. I imagine modernising the kitchen, replacing the old furniture, the table the cupboards, the dresser, all of it for a more modern affair with cupboards of a high-gloss white and polished slate worktops, chrome fittings, ceramic hob, microwave, wine rack... oh, and glittering white wall-tiles.

All the mod-cons. Make it so!

Sure enough, this is what we walk into, and I'm impressed by my efforts, but she says nothing, just accepts it all as normal, as I would expect, her being a mere dream companion.

She sets down the bag and makes to fill the kettle from the tap, but stops and turns and holds me tight. And then, with feeling, says: "That was the best sex I've had in my life."

It's just a shame I'm making her say it.

Stop it Phil! Don't lose your virtue here. Respect the symbol of Adrienne, or you cannot respect her in real life, and you'll learn nothing from the experience.

Help me Gramps?

Sleep, lad. Sleep back to waking. Hold her close all the while, and revere her as you would your queen, your goddess.

I make a mental change to the bedroom, Amelia's room, decorate it in subtler shades of cream and yellow, modernise the furnishings, make the bed wider. I add posts and drapes, make it feather soft, the sheets silken to the touch and the duvet a blessing of gentleness.

"Come upstairs, let's sleep."

She forgets the kettle, takes my hand and lets me lead her away, her easy compliance betraying her imposture. "All right."

There's no resistance, no reluctance to enter Amelia's room – no queer dread as on that first occasion when, together, we'd fled from it, overwhelmed by its strangeness and the emotions it aroused in us. The feisty Adrienne is a shell now, lacking will and, like a child, I must protect her while this helpless part of her resides, floating, in my imagination.

I lead her to the bed, she slips off the dress without self-consciousness, like a wife of many years, then slides beneath the duvet and we draw together with a gentle familiarity.

"Are you all right, Phil?"

"Yes. The night's perfect. Lets sleep."

Lie safe, lie secure Adrienne. Let me take you back now. Back to where we were. Back to where we belong, where you can wake up and be yourself again, say what you think, say what you want, and not be this sleepy avatar – this submissive ghost, compliant to my whims.

She settles her head into the crook of my arm, readies herself for sleep.

And the feel of her is sex, the touch of her leg against my thigh is the white heat and the flowering of orgasm. Her breath, as it drifts against my skin, is sweet and masquerades as love itself. It smells and tastes like honey. When I'm like this, I can feel colours, see words, smell sounds. All are symbols, all are thoughts in the seething void of heaven's potential, but we always resist because we crave the firmer levels of reality, and it's precisely because we resist we can never grasp our true nature.

I feel her sinking into sleep, hear the pattern of her breath change, become deeper, and there's a faint whistle from her nose, steady as the swing of a pendulum. I will it to take me in, to carry me off as well, but the dream holds on, holds me back, I sense, for another purpose. I even try to fear it, but discover I've grown too familiar with lucidity to truly fear it. To fear it only means you're not thinking straight.

Okay, so something else is going on here.

I give it an hour, then rise from bed, but leave her sleeping there, admiring for a moment her shoulders – round, sculpted by a genius – as are the hollows of her neck, her throat. And the hair – red but glistening with copper. Is the real Adrienne as lovely as this? Or, as in this dream, do I embellish her?

Without consciously dressing, I descend the stairs fully clothed now. The yellow light of dawn is already coming in through the kitchen windows, maturing quickly into mid-morning – where a woman and a girl are bent over the table kneading dough. They're each wearing fitted dresses, eighties style, nipped waists, shoulder pads and puffed sleeves. I accept all of this as if it were perfectly natural.

The woman is dark haired, forty, with dramatic features – a Hollywood movie star from the golden age. She is Lauren Bacall. She is Rita Hayworth. The girl is sixteen, beautiful, willowy, red-

haired. Adrienne? No... Birdy. Birdy and Amelia? Mother and daughter? So Amelia is Adrienne's mother? *No, don't think so literally, Phil.*

"Good morning," I try.

Amelia smiles her welcome. "I hope you don't mind," she says, "but I preferred my kitchen the way it was." She speaks like Adrienne, a soft voice but it carries well.

"Of course. I'm sorry for interfering with it."

Birdy does not speak for now, but neither do her eyes leave me. I draw up a chair and sit at the table, savouring the scent of baking, the scent of flour, and dough. These are the scents of that first afternoon, when Adrienne and I came in and the sun was warming the kitchen – cinnamon, and a hint of ginger. Birdy brings me tea and sits at my elbow. I notice she's wearing the pendants; the pentangle and the tree of life, and the girl making love to the moon. It reminds me now of Adrienne, last night as she made love to me. Then there are the silver beads, each one bearing a single letter, spelling out her name. Amelia divides the dough into loaves, drops them onto trays, and sets them aside to rise – all the while watching me, watching Birdy.

She sits across the table, reaches out with flour dusted fingers and takes my hands in both of hers, wraps my fingers in the feel of love, the feel of the house. The house – so dangerous to get to, so difficult to leave, a jewel of welcome amid the bleakness of the treacherous sands of the bay. Love, an oasis of infinite reality amid the temporal impartiality of nature. Love, our island. Love alone granting us meaning.

"Philip," she says. "Welcome."

Yes, I'm in love with Amelia, as I feel the love in her for me. But I'm also in love with Birdy. I feel something dissolving now, coalescing into a new thing.

Amelia smiles.

Birdy puts her hand upon my arm, and I am granted the insight that she and Amelia are a manifestation of one and the same thing, a thing that's been with me always. An idea, an archetype. They are all I project into the world, all I imagine other women to be: mothers, lovers, daughters, crones. They are all I know, and it’s through them I spin the thread of my life and weave it into the intricately patterned cloth of the world.

I think I already know this and look to Amelia for more. I feel

Birdy's grip tightening on my arm and in the subtle fluctuation of the pressure, I read the further insight that we are none of us alone who are loved. And we are loved, even when we think we are alone. We have only to close our eyes, invite our familiars into closer dialogue, and they will come.

This is what Amelia is telling me.

She smiles that I understand this, then touches her fingers to my lids in order to close them, and then I'm up by the castle.

Amelia is older now, in her fifties, and I'm lying beside her in the long grass, upon a picnic rug, while she knits. It's a sweater, in the Arran style, an incredibly detailed texture, the wool twisted from the fleece of sheep that roam the outer Hebrides. Here is a thing that will last for many lives, she's saying, a thing to be passed down from one generation to the next, and each time a perfect fit. She tries it against me for size, and nods in approval.

“It'll do nicely," she says.

There are girls playing in the meadow, Birdy and Adrienne? Our daughters, I suppose, or do they have the faces of Adrienne's daughters – the way I'd imagined them when Adrienne first spoke their names? Sandy, nine years old and Melissa, a little older, more like Chuck. There's a breeze coming in from the sea, not cold, but enough to stir the grasses, to make them swish, and just enough to lift a kite, to make it dance and spread its tail out into a curvaceous "S", like the line behind my grandfather's fly-rod.

The moment before he casts.

Gramps?

There's a camper van parked a little way down the track, chrome details glittering in the sunlight. And Amelia is now Adrienne, an easy familiarity between us, decades old, centuries old. The sea is blue-green, like the Caribbean of my distant memory, and there's a ring of white water far out, like a reef. The tide is in, but we're confident we'll be okay. We know this place. We know the fickleness of the sea, the unpredictability of the crossing, but we don't fear to stay between the tides any more – besides, we have the camper.

I glance at Adrienne, see the wrinkles round her eyes, the paler strands in her hair. She's fifty now, or maybe sixty. She smiles, her dimpled cheeks, her eyes radiating warmth and love, and I settle down beside her, bathe myself in her glow, and close my eyes. Ah, yes, I'm thinking, this'll do...

"Wait," says a voice.

Amelia.

I open my eyes and expect to see her, but it's Birdy, older now, the young woman of the dream before. We're alone. Just she and I, and the camper van. The enigma of this place has returned – summed up no more neatly than in the puzzle of the tides. She's looking down at me, reading my thoughts, but giving nothing of herself away.

"Tell me what to do, Birdy. Tell me how to do this right, because I'm afraid to get it wrong."

She offers her hand and draws me up. Then I'm walking with her down the hill, towards the sea. She says nothing, but I can feel her, and the feel of her is love, tenderness, a desire to nurture and to guide. She brings me down to the jetty and we gaze out across a waste of mud and sand and storm strewn kelp. The tide is out but my dream has erased the causeway, leaving only a pair of narrow tyre tracks snaking out across the softness, towards the singular sharks tooth profile of Refuge Crag.

They're too narrow for a car. Bicycles perhaps?

She points to the crag, and I recognise the moment as leading on from the previous dream, the dream of Birdy looking out from the meadow, at the crag. I still don't know what she means by it. Does she want me to go out there? I look at the tyre marks and feel a chill. I'm afraid to go.

"Come with me?" I ask.

I don't know why I feared she would not come. I'd not dared to trust in her, I suppose. But asking is all it takes, and the next thing I know, we're already half way out to the crag, not walking, but seemingly gliding over the mirror of the wet sand on big old black-framed bicycles, the sea a twisted ribbon of silver, miles out on the horizon. Starfish, glorious in shades of red and orange, mark our way. And as we reach the crag, the sea closes behind us.

Atop the crag, nestled in a sheltered nook, we come upon the refuge, a stone building, no bigger than a bus shelter. It has a plank door which opens to Birdy's touch, and then she shows me into the parlour of my grandma's house. Gramps is sitting at a table, sucking on a pipe and puzzling over a board game – a grid on which are placed counters, a mix of black and white. It's the Chinese game of Go – deceptively complex in its apparent simplicity, and I never did get the hang of it.

He smiles to see me, speaks my name, his voice warm and gravelly, then he invites me to sit and play, but I'm shaking my head, ashamed. "I wish I knew how, Gramps."

And I'm dreaming all of this, remember, so we're talking of more than just the game now.

"There's nowt to it really," he's telling me. "Sit, thi down... I'll show you..."

"But it's so complicated, and there's no time – the tide will cut me off again."

"The rules are simple," he says. "You just place the counters like so, the one after the other. As for the tide, you should never fear the flood, nor anticipate the ebb. But take each in its turn... the one thing after the other."

I know this is meaningful, but I have the sense of being pressed for time, and I know I'll never get at it while I'm so bound up in the transience of events. I'm aware of the tide having closed now, aware of Adrienne still sleeping far away, and I know I can't be this close to the mainland without her, that I'll have to go back, because I have given myself to her and am nothing without that bond. But I'm no good with the tides, I can't work them out, and I fear the flood because I don't want to drown, and I fear the ebb because you never know how long you've got, nor when it's going to turn and cut you off before your time.

"Help us Gramps? Please."

He gestures to the board, and I sit down to play, but now the black and white counters have become tea-leaves in the bottom of a cup, a cup into which my grandma peers while making patterns for me – a bird in flight, a boat tossed upon the sea, an Arran patterned jumper, and all the jumbled stuff of dreams. And then she's whispering in my ear the secret spell to set us free, and the whisper becomes a tickle, and then a chuckle and I wake up by the sacred well, to the dawn light and Adrienne tickling my ear with a stalk of rye-grass.

"There's no way you're coming back to my place tonight," she's saying. "You snore like a pig. I'll never sleep with you around."

I'm stiff, my throat thick with phlegm, and I feel a peculiar irritation that I'd not had time to catch my grandma's words, that I still don't know the secret of the tides. I don't need the coin to tell me where I am, or whether this is real or just another splinter from my dream turned lucid.

Adrienne's right – this feels very much like being alive to me.

She's dressed, the cardigan around her shoulders against the chill. The mist has moved a little further up the land, which is now invaded by ghostly sprites, drifting, seeking, dancing. It renders the island weird, unsettling. It's time we left this place. It's dissolving into the stuff of dreams. We should take care it doesn't dissolve us along with it.

"Welcome back," she says. "When you sleep you really sleep, don't you?"

I focus on her fingers. She still wears my ring, but it's on her right hand, not her left. We are not hand-fasted then? No... that had been too much to hope for, and I feel its transformation into dream-dust like a lance through the heart, because it had felt so right, so perfect, and its loss now feels so wrong.

But you heard her! We made love, Can that not be enough for now? Sure, I might rest secure in that, were it not for the fear that come a year and a day she will have forgotten all about me.

Chapter 28

Hand-fasting

I'm at the kitchen table, hunched over a steaming cup of tea, still shivering a little from being out all night. Adrienne is looking at me over her shoulder from the stove where she's warming beans and sausage in a pan.

"I dreamed," I tell her, then shrug as if that's all there is to say, that it should explain everything. But I'm forgetting she wasn't really with me in that dream. It was just her sleepy avatar, and she remembers nothing.

"You mean like one of those dreams where you meet the girl of your dreams, then wake up next to your wife of forty years, and she's wearing hair curlers and a face-pack?"

I laugh. "No... one where you find yourself hand-fasted to your dream girl for a year and a day, then wake up to find the ring is still on the other finger."

I wish I'd not said that, but I'm too late to take it back and can only close my eyes in embarrassment.

She pauses in the stirring of the pan, thinks on it, then recommences more hurriedly than before. "I see. Anything else?"

No comeback. Only a careless aside... what does that mean? What to say? What else – there's so much to choose from. "Gramps is living out on Refuge Crag, behind a door that leads directly to my grandma's front room."

"Oh? Well, what's he doing out there when we need him here with us?"

"He's trying to teach me how to play Go."

"Go?"

"You know, that Chinese game with black and white counters. But I haven't a clue how to play – never did, and the more I think about it, the less I'm likely to get it."

"Then stop thinking about it," she says. "And just make a move. Learn from what happens. Isn't that what's life's all about?"

And with those words she pierces the surface of the dream and I realise that's exactly what Gramps had been trying to tell me:"You're making too much of things, Phil. So just sit down and play."

"Anyway what does your grandma have to say about all of this?"

"She's reading my future in the tea-leaves."

"And what do they tell you?"

"No... I've said enough already. And we can't be held responsible for the content of our dreams."

"Yes we can. Of course we can. They're the truest of the true, Phil. You know that. So tell me."

"All right... if not our dreams, then how we interpret them. And mine are telling me my future's up by that sacred well."

She's puzzled by this. "Oh?"

"She's tickling my ear with a piece of rye-grass, telling me I snore like a pig."

She laughs, then frowns, then bangs the pan on the trivet and rattles the bowls as she dishes out the beans. I tell her: "I'm sorry about the hand-fasting thing. It was in the dream because we'd talked about it, that's all."

She sets the bowls upon the table, more gently now, then leans across and takes my hand, squeezes it hard, eyes closed for a moment as if to marshal her words. Then she looks at me, and in her eyes I really do see the future.

"You'll be a difficult man to live with," she says. "Your damned faeries tell you everything."

She slides the ring from the third finger of her right hand to the left. "We talked about making an offering, didn't we? And I said I wasn't sure I was up to it, or you either. Well, that was it: I was going to offer myself, to you. I mean... not *was*,.. *am*."

"Offer yourself?"

"You heard me, Mr *Simpson* I offer *myself*. To you. A year and a day. Like we said."

A wave of energy washes through me, stilling me, leaving me mute, astonished,... delighted,...

"But don't get your hopes up," she adds. "I'm just stringing you along because I need you to get me to America, let me hold my girls one more time before I sink without a trace. Then I'll dump you like all my other boyfriends."

"Thanks a lot."

I can't help myself: I check the coin, lay it flat upon the table: Heads. Then I turn it, hesitantly: Tails.

No, not dreaming this time.

This is serious.

Adrienne's staring at me. "Is that how you decide whether to accept me or not? By tossing a coin?"

"I... I thought I'd explained the coin thing. I just wanted to check which version of reality this was before we take it any further. I don't want to wake up disappointed again, that's all."

She's still looking at me, something fierce about her, like she's set down the most precious of jewels between us, and is now trying to frighten me away from picking it up.

"My honest advice is don't do it, Phil. You don't know me. But I've made the offering, and I'll stand by it. Take me or leave me. For a year and a day. But really, my advice is to run, because I'm a mess. I need someone strong enough to tell me when they think I'm being a fool, strong enough not to take it personally when I lash back at them. But most of all I need someone insightful and kind and selfless enough to still think well enough of me to spoil me like I'm a princess, and most of all to make me feel safe. So run, while there's still time."

"I can't run. Like you said, you need me to help you get to America."

"But seriously don't do it. Think about it. Carefully."

"I don't need to think about it. What was the spell?"

"The spell?"

"What did you wish for last night?"

"Deliverance."

"That we get off Leven Isle safely? And in return you shackle yourself to a middle aged loser who's about to quit his job."

"Call yourself a loser again, and I'll slap your face until your ears bleed."

I'm moved by her defence of my virtues and I try to think of a suitably irreverent comeback. "Do that and I'll,... I'll,... spank your bottom till it's,... black and blue."

She laughs."No. Sorry, that doesn't do it for me at all."

"Okay. It was lame." Then I take the ring and transfer it to the third finger of my left hand, screw it gently into place. "Until the day after midsummer, Ms Divine. But what if I'm not ready to quit after that. Will I be a fool or a saint?"

She's shaking her head, bemused. I've just taken the words from her mouth again. My intuitions are morphing more often into premonitions than I'm used to.

"You can be a bit creepy at times, you know?"

"Says she who casts spells in the throes of an orgasm."

"I promise not to do it every time. You accept me then, warts

and all?"

"From the moment I first saw you."

She runs her hands over her face, as if feeling for blemishes. "Which warts are we talking about?" She's smiling.

"Shut up."

"That's the spirit, Mr Simpson."

"It’s Sampson.”

Married then, in all but name.

I check the coin once more – just to be doubly sure. Still head and tails, still real. But if I'm not dreaming this, how can I be taking any of it so calmly? Why does it feel like the most natural thing? And why am I already thinking ahead, wondering what might yet go wrong?

Chapter 29

Flight

We walk to the patterned dolmen, and Adrienne runs her fingers over its lines once more as it basks there in a shaft of morning sunlight. Ahead of us is the lane that descends to the dunes, but the way is still thick with mist, sprites breaking loose and venturing up towards us, as if curious. Meanwhile, the high ground is a glorious emerald green, the low ground, and the sea, still the stuff of imagination. It is a dream that still will not let us go.

"Looks like it didn't work," she says."I don't know what else I can offer here."

"We don't know for sure it hasn't worked. Mists can drift in and out with the tide. Give it a little time. Or maybe... maybe I'll have to promise to delete my Flickr account. Would that be sacrifice enough, do you think? Or, since nobody will notice, will it even count?"

She's impressed. "Obscurity again? It would matter to you though, so it might count. But speaking of obscurity, how long before the world notices we're no longer in it, do you think?"

"Hmm?"

"It's Sunday. In twenty four hours we should both be at our desks. Crabby Carstairs will be tut-tutting, thinking I'm hung over and still in bed. How long before she thinks otherwise, raises the alarm and the police come looking for us? A day, two, three? Will she even care?"

"Well, it might be weeks before I'm missed. They'll assume I'm off on a business trip and I've forgotten to tell anyone – it wouldn't be the first time." I laugh. "I'm trying to imagine the press speculation, I mean if we're never found. What will they surmise from all the bits of information they can piece together? Can you imagine our pictures in all the seedy papers? They'll assume I've abducted you of course."

"Of course."

"You'll be the clichéd vulnerable female and I'll be the obligatory psychopathic loner."

She wrinkles her nose. "We're worth a better story than that, but you're probably right. That's the best we'll be allowed."

"And whatever story they come up with, decades from now our

front page will be rotting in some run-down shed at the edge of the tide. And our real story will never be known."

"Well, you're a cheerful soul this morning." She smiles, stretches her fingers, examines the ring more closely. "What'll we do, I mean, if we do ever get away from here?"

"Why not start with America."

"America?"

"Your girls."

"Well... yes... but just don't get my hopes up there, Phil."

"I'm not saying it'll be easy – only that I can at least get you there, and hold your hand."

"When will we go, do you think?"

"As soon as you like. Next weekend if you can manage it. Baltimore you said? We'll need a week to do the trip justice. I'm owed some leave. Just say the word."

"Really? Just like that? But all of this is assuming we get away from here, and I'm still not convinced we'll ever manage it."

"We'll manage it. The question is, will we ever come back?"

"Ah... you're wondering about buying the house again?"

"You think we should let it go?"

"I don't think we came here to buy this house, Phil."

"You don't?"

She said we. She definitely said we!

"We came here to find one another, I think. And I'm glad for it. No, don't smile, I mean it. But listen... I was wondering... Do you know where Shipley is?"

"Yes, I know Shipley. It's the next village up the valley from Marston, where I was born. Why do you ask?"

"There's a small-holding coming up. Five acres. Run down. Been empty for a while. I've only seen the photographs, but I like the look of it. And now, having met you, I was thinking it would be perfect for a man with time on his hands, a man who wants dogs and donkeys, and a woman to darn his socks."

"How much?"

"Same as this."

"It must be a wreck."

She nods. "It is. Interested?"

"You'll never make an estate agent, Adrienne. And you'll never sit and darn my socks."

"But does it interest you, Phil?"

"I don't know. I was so sure Amelia wanted me to buy this place."

"So did I at first. But this is no place for donkeys. What do you think?"

Actually, I'm thinking of the dream of Birdy now, both dreams in fact, wondering if her pointing across the sands to Refuge Crag wasn't more of a hint that our future does indeed lie away from Leven Isle – maybe even this wreck of a farmhouse Adrienne's talking about now. It would be a leap. Like sitting down and making the first moves in a game you don't really understand. A game of Go.

But to her question: "I think we should go take a look at it. And then we should go to America."

I hope I'm not deceiving her in any of this, that I can live up to her expectations. A trip to Baltimore is neither here nor there to me – a couple of weeks, a month, whatever she needs... also to sell up and sink my life's savings, to say nothing of my life in a project with a woman I only met a couple of days ago. No problem, really.

The mist clears gradually so that by noon we can see the sea. The tide is in. Adrienne ventures down to the jetty in order to retrieve her car, while I wash the pots, and make the house tidy again, hopefully for the last time. But as I work I wonder if it's necessary, if we won't just end up making the place messy once more when we have to stay another night – for surely we will never leave, now that we have made such tantalising plans. Have we jinxed it?

She's gone longer than I expect.

I end up drumming my fingers on the kitchen table, impatient, trying to hold down an irrational fear, that once more that I am imagining all of this – that even the dreams have been part of the grander dream of Leven Isle. But more I fear I might have imagined Adrienne too. It's the only thing that makes sense – that she could only be the way she is with me, the way girls are in dreams, because... I've made her up – made her into everything I wanted her to be.

Come on, Phil. Get a grip, man!

I imagine it should take about ten minutes to walk to the jetty, and a minute to drive back. But twenty minutes later she's still not returned. After half an hour I know something's wrong and I'm outside, waiting on the step for her, thinking of setting off in search,

wondering if she's all right and dreading the shock of finding myself without her, of not hearing her voice. But then... I mean... she couldn't have just... just driven off without me, could she?

So, I feel a fool when she appears, striding up the dusty lane. But she's on foot and wearing a pained expression. I was right then: the island does not mean to let us go.

"It won't start," she says.

Ah. It has us there. I'd not thought of that one.

I walk with her, back to the car – not that I can do any more than she's done already. I try to start it. Nothing. And the starter sounds weak now after Adrienne's already been winding it on for a while – so I'd better not labour it. I switch off and hand her back the keys.

She looks at me gravely: "We can't spend another night on this island, Phil!"

We've said this before. But she's right, because tomorrow we're due back in the world again. It's not that I'm thinking we'll both be missed, or that we'll have some explaining to do. It's more that I'm afraid of delaying any longer, and finding those connections have dissolved, that I'll wash back upon the mainland shore to discover no one knows our names. But then would that be such a bad thing?

"Can you ride a bike?"

"Borrow those bicycles in the cabin?" She looks out across the bay to the mainland. "Is that wise? I mean, considering our luck so far? Do you think we can get across in time, on a bike?"

"You said yourself, it's only a mile or so. We'll watch the tide ebb, wait for the causeway to clear, like yesterday, then we know we've got hours to cross, and it should only take us ten minutes. We could walk it quite safely, just the same." But even as I'm saying this, I'm remembering my crossing in the car and the feeling of vulnerability, being so far out. How I'll feel on a bike, I can't imagine.

She gazes out across the churning plain of the sea. It looks so permanent, so lively, so lovely that morning under the sun, it's inconceivable the bay will ever be reduced to mudflats again, that the way will ever open for us to return to life on the mainland.

"You don't think we'll just end up cycling off the edge of the known world?"

So, she's feeling it too.

And then I realise what I'm most afraid of is returning to the

world to find everything exactly as we left it, our places waiting for us and the expectation we should be as we were before.

"Maybe cycling off the edge of the known world is exactly what's needed."

She's nodding. "It has to be a different world or nothing?"

"I see no other way."

"Then it had better be so, Mr Simpson, or I'll be wanting my money back."

"It's Sampson. And of course it'll be different. The difference is *us*."

We open up the cabin and pull the bicycles out, ancient, black frames, and they each weigh a ton. All the tyres are flat of course, but a few minutes with the pump and they're restored to a reassuring firmness that holds against my pessimistic expectations. There's a ladies model with a step-through frame, which I pass to Adrienne. She takes the bars and gives the bell a try. It responds with a cheery tinkle that makes her smile.

A good omen.

We fasten up the cabin, and wheel the bikes down to the shore.

The paleness of late morning matures to deeper contrasts now, and the green of the mainland turns into a striking crinkled baize while the light takes on a warmer sepia-hue, like in the photograph of my great great grandfather whose ring Adrienne now wears. Meanwhile, limestone buildings, clustered on the distant mainland shore light up, shining gold, like a lost and holy citadel. They beckon as the sun crosses the meridian... and the tide slowly ebbs.

The bay becomes stiller by degrees until it forms a mirror reflecting the sky, black, then beige, then puddled sand, and finally the pitted concrete causeway reveals itself, a snaking, buckled, busted trail, curving out into forgotten briny wastes. The sea, to the right of it, is flat calm, no waves to roll and tease. They draw back as if charmed, opening up the way for us to pass.

It's time.

Like birds staring at the door of their cage pulled suddenly open, Adrienne and I hesitate, staring out at our return to a mainland life, not believing in it at first, and fearing it too because there's been something unique about our time here the like of which we shall not know again.

"Come, Ms Divine. Let us both transcend our obscurity."

Then as one, we mount up and ride out, our reflections chasing

us across the puddled sands.

Adrienne is laughing as she splashes through the wet, pedalling furiously, the wind in her hair, and me standing on the pedals to catch her up. She looks back to make sure I'm there, takes comfort in it I think, and accelerates away.

The salt breeze is in my face coaxing up the tears again. Refuge Crag is gained with ease, and then I know for sure... we're on our way.

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And finally, *finally,* the poem Adrienne promised me. The one she wrote that last afternoon on Leven Isle, when she understood the nature of things better than I, understood too the value of the sacrifice we both would make in coming back to our selves.

And gladly so:

Between the Tides

I find myself caught
Between the tides,

Surrounded by a shallow sea,
With you.
Your heartbeat unfamiliar
But not unkind.
And me,
As always, slow to dance
To rhythms I cannot comfortably circle
With my hips.
But we are not trapped here.
This loneliness is finite,
Familiar in its melancholy,
Transient as birds.
And though the distant shore
Of all we know seems lost,
It is not blackness,
Or treachery that waylays,
More a friendly fate,
I think,
One that in kindness cannot give us up
As flotsam tossed to rot once more,
In mud.
Take then my hand my love,
Until you feel the dance in me
And I in you,
And let us make the rhythm
Of ourselves once more
Our own.
A.D. For PAS
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